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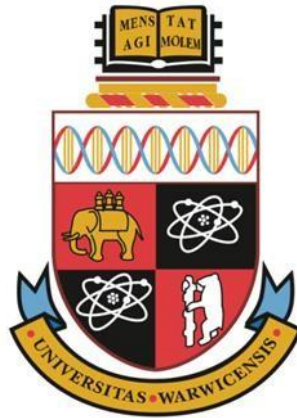
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Online Audience Responses to the Representations of Animals in Wildlife Docu-soaps

Ph.D THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis investigates audience responses to representations of animals in two wildlife docu-soaps: Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island. Wildlife docu-soaps are a hybrid genre which shares features with other genres such as soap opera and reality TV. I undertake a qualitative study that uses content analysis to explore online audience comments, reviews and interactions on three websites: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube. I also carry out a textual analysis of an episode from each of the programmes. My findings indicate that audiences respond to meanings offered by the texts but also read texts in a range of ways, indicating their active engagement with the narrative. Furthermore, individualisation and anthropomorphism are key to audiences' emotional responses to the animal characters. In my analysis, I draw on concepts which have been developed for understanding audience responses to programmes depicting humans, specifically human-interest story, identification and para-social relations. I find, however, that, while useful, they are unable to completely account for responses that relate to wildlife docu-soaps' focus on animals; this suggests a different conceptual framework is required for programmes narrativizing animal lives. I explore how online communities shape audience responses: audience members not only use online spaces to share their interests and enthusiasm about the programmes, but also to exchange information with each other. They also compare and judge various para-texts and encourage others to do so which contributes to their responses to wildlife docu-soaps. I conclude that wildlife docu- soap audiences show a variety of responses which can be contradictory and are often in tension with each other; they raise questions about the ethics of filming wild animals and about relationships between humans and animals as well as exhibiting emotional responses to individual animal characters. Online communities have a significant role in shaping audience responses, which are different on the three platforms.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis explores online audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps, a particular genre of wildlife programming. I focus on two wildlife docu-soaps as examples of the genre, Meerkat Manor (2005-2008) and Orangutan Island (2007-2009), and discuss audience responses to them on three different online platforms: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube. The research uses a qualitative methodology, analysing audience responses through qualitative content analysis, and the programmes themselves through textual analysis. In this introductory chapter I discuss how I chose my research topic and the intellectual significance of the project. I then set out the questions that guided my research and my main arguments before outlining the structure of my thesis.

Like many doctoral researchers, it took me a while to settle on the topic of my research. My Ph.D. journey started with a completely different project in mind: an investigation of the educational value of zoos. I soon realised, however, that I did not have enough resources or time to accomplish what I had originally planned. While I was exploring possible topics, I encountered wildlife docu-soaps. I became fascinated by them and how people respond to them, especially how some people are devastated by the death of a wild animal to the extent of writing an emotional blog post about their feelings (Candea, 2010). At that time, I was still interested in exploring how people learn about wild animals and wanted to investigate the educational and conservation value of wildlife docu-soaps. I realised that one way of doing this would be to look at audiences' responses to these programmes.

Wildlife docu-soaps emerged in the 1990s from a range of precursors including programmes such as Animal Magic (1962-1983). The first wildlife docu-soap, according to Richards (2014), was Big Cat Diary (1996-2008) which was initially broadcast in 1996 and ran for 12 years. Richards identifies Big Cat Diary as a wildlife docu-soap which she characterises as a new style of personality presenter-led wildlife documentary; she comments that 'viewers were being offered a vision of wildlife that was intimate, personal, and self-consciously rough edged' (p. 2). While Big Cat Diary was 'presenter-led', other wildlife docu-soaps put animal characters at the centre of the programme while a narrator tells the story. Thus, although there are differences within the genre, wildlife docu-soaps

are united by their focus on animals who are individualised, in the sense that they have their own names and distinct personalities, and there is a continuous narrative following the same individuals over time. Wildlife docu-soaps, I contend, are a sub-genre of wildlife documentary. Moreover they are a hybrid genre. They take a docu-soap format which has been defined as character-centred, factual entertainment (Kilborn, Hibberd & Boyle, 2001) with an emphasis on dramatic events, something which is found in other TV dramas (Milius, 2007), and have the ‘aesthetic of reality TV’ which highlights intimacy (Richards, 2014, p. 2). During the course of this thesis I argue that their hybridity influences audiences’ responses to them.

I had encountered Meerkat Manor (MM) in the early stages of my doctoral research. It is a TV programme first broadcast in 2004 by Animal Planet International. The central character is Flower, a meerkat and the matriarch of a group called the Whiskers, and the story focuses on the meerkats and their dramatic lives. MM quickly became a popular series on Animal Planet (Candea, 2010; Clutton-Brock, 2010). In 2007, following the success of MM, another wildlife docu-soap, Orangutan Island (OI), was broadcast, also by Animal Planet International. OI also has a story focusing on animal characters, in this case, orangutans who are rescued by humans and placed on an island to learn survival skills and cooperate with each other in order to live in the wild one day.

Wildlife docu-soaps represent animals in a way which, I suggest, arises from its hybrid genre aspects. Their dramatic, soap opera-like stories are narrativised, but they are based on real events involving particular individual animals. This means that narrativised and factual elements co-exist. This is, of course, also the case for other genres, such as docu-soaps and reality TV, but the way wildlife docu-soaps combine them is specific.

Furthermore the characters are animals rather than humans. This creates a challenge when analysing audience responses because the concepts that are normally deployed have been developed for human-based programmes. Research into audience responses to genres such as soap opera and reality TV, for instance, use the concepts para-social interaction (Schiappa et al., 2006; Sood, 2002), human-interest story, and identification (Cohen, 2001). In this thesis I explore what happens when frameworks used to analyse programmes depicting humans are used instead to look at programmes depicting animals and argue that these concepts and frameworks can contribute to analysing audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps, but that they do not capture the whole range of responses.

Of particular interest is the emotional responses of audiences to wildlife docu-soaps given the arguments put forward about human-animal relations being increasingly empathetic and the way that these changes have influenced wildlife filming (Franklin, 1999). There is evidence that wildlife docu-soaps elicit emotional responses; Candea (2010), for instance, noted an emotional blog post from an MM viewer upon the death of one of the characters. People responding emotionally to animal stories is neither new nor unusual. For example, animal stories which employ anthropomorphism have been long found to elicit emotional responses from audiences. For example, in the UK in the 19th century, *Black Beauty* (Sewell, 1877) was written from the perspective of a horse named Black Beauty; this elicited empathy towards horses and their plight and raised an awareness of animal welfare at the time (Nyman, 2016; Hansen, 2012). The case of *Black Beauty* also highlights the complexities of anthropomorphism which invites humans to understand the world from an animal's perspective. The emotional appeal created by anthropomorphism and individualisation has also been observed in other historical times and places; in Victorian England, for instance, anti-vivisectionists used these techniques in pieces about animals to make the case against vivisection and generate an emotional response (Mayer, 2008).

In this thesis, I also explore the way online communities shape audiences' responses. Being online has become a part of audiences' viewing experiences. For instance, Falero (2016) shows how audiences use online platforms to talk about TV programmes. Talking about a programme is a significant part of watching television (Hill, 2005; Brown, 1994), and being online can make it easier for people to find others who are interested in the same programmes who they can communicate with (McKenna et al., 2002). Indeed, online communities and social networking sites have increased significantly (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009) especially those associated with television programmes (Deery, 2003). Related to this is the extent to which different platforms affect the formation of online communities, and hence shape audience responses, and my focus on 3 different platforms enables me to explore this question.

An investigation of how audiences respond to wildlife docu-soaps has not, to my knowledge, been undertaken previously, and it could have significant implications for how we understand audience responses to representations of animals. It has been argued that the

way animals are represented ‘has the potential, to a substantial degree, to affect the general human understanding and interaction with all animals. This has positive, neutral, and negative implications for all involved’ (Pahin & Macfadyen, 2013, p. 232). This comment highlights the importance of understanding how audiences respond to representations of animals and raises the possibility of their having an effect on human-animal relations. It has also been suggested that narratives of nature in wildlife documentaries can create an ‘emotional relationship to animals’ (Horak, 2006, p. 462). By investigating audience responses, this thesis addresses how the representation of animals in wildlife docu-soaps shapes audiences’ responses to the programmes and to the animal characters.

Before outlining the structure of my thesis, I need to clarify my use of the word ‘animals’. I use it to refer to non-human animals while, at the same time, recognising that dualistic terms like ‘human and animal’ and ‘nature and culture’ are typical of Western thought (Newton, 2007) and divide humans from other animals. This separation reinforces the species barrier ‘...which allegedly separates humans from other animals’ (Charles & Davies, 2008, p. 13). Carter and Charles (2011) point out that, ‘Sociology frequently assumes a clear distinction between human and animal, society and nature – a distinction which has been mobilized to support a human- centric view of the world’ (p. 2). Because of this, researchers often use the terms ‘human and non-human animals’ to highlight the connections between the two as ‘the use of these terms recognises that humans are themselves animals while the use of the binary human/animal does not’ (Charles & Davies, 2008, p. 24). Although, I agree with this argument, for ease of exposition I use the term animal in this thesis.

1.1: Research questions

My research questions are:

- 1) What are the responses of audiences to wildlife docu-soaps online?
- i) How do audiences respond to narrative structure and characterization?
- ii) How do audiences connect emotionally with animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps?

- 2) How are audience responses shaped by online communities?
- 3) How do different platforms affect the formation of online communities and through that, audience responses?

In order to explore these questions I focus on audiences and their responses to Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island between 2005 and 2016 on three different online platforms: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube.

1.2: Structure of the thesis

In this section I outline the structure of my thesis and its main arguments.

Having introduced the topic of my research in Chapter 1, Chapters 2 and 3 situate it in debates concerning changing human-animal relations, how these changes have influenced wildlife programming and how audience responses to different TV genres have been analysed. In Chapter 2 I focus on arguments that human-animal relations in the west are increasingly empathetic and that this change came about in the late 20th century through a range of social changes (Franklin, 1999; Bulliet, 2005). This argument is set against those who argue that different categories of animal are treated differently and that the claim that human-animal relations in general are increasingly empathetic is problematic (Cudworth, 2011). It is argued that these social changes have not only influenced human-animal relations but also the form taken by wildlife documentaries (Franklin, 1999) and I show that the way wildlife programmes have changed since the early 20th century supports this claim. There have also been changes in the media and television industries which are associated with changes in the focus of wildlife documentaries and in the way they represent animals (Chris, 2006). I explore how changes in the representations of animals, technological change and increasing commercial pressures in the industry led to the emergence in the 1990s of a sub-genre of wildlife documentary called wildlife docu-soap (Kilborn, 2006).

Chapter 3 focuses on the idea of genre and how audience responses to different genres have been analysed. It begins by outlining key ideas and arguments on genre which relate to my argument that wildlife docu-soaps are a hybrid genre. This argument is based on the way wildlife docu-soaps incorporate aspects of other genres, such as docu-soap, soap opera and reality TV. In addition to being hybrid genre, I argue that wildlife docu-soaps have four main characteristics: a particular narrative structure, individualised animal characters, human-interest stories, and anthropomorphic representations of animals. Although these characteristics can be found in other genres, wildlife docu-soap combines them in a particular way, while also drawing on the realism of wildlife documentaries. I suggest that its combination of narrativised animal lives and real events happening to living animals is important when considering audience responses. I identify the key concepts that have been used to analyse audience responses to reality TV and docu-soaps, human-interest story, para-social relations and identification, and question whether these concepts are useful for analysing responses to wildlife docu-soaps. The chapter also explores how audiences' responses are shaped by online communities and the possibilities this creates for the development of collective responses and media literacy. The chapter ends with a summary of the key concepts that shape my analysis.

Chapter 4 describes how I did the research and explains why I chose the method of qualitative content analysis for this investigation of audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. I explain why I chose to focus on MM and OI. I then describe content analysis and how it can be used to find patterns and meanings in textual materials. I argue that content analysis is appropriate for analysing audience's written responses in online forums and explain how I developed a set of analytical codes through careful readings of the data. This enabled me to categorize audience responses into themes and topics. Having done this I carried out further qualitative analysis in order to investigate the more detailed and nuanced aspects of the textual comments. In addition I watched both MM and OI many times in order to understand the programmes and provide a context for the research which I describe in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 describes MM and OI, thereby providing a context in which to understand audiences' responses to them. I outline the main story-lines and the central characters of both programmes, exploring the way the animals are represented through the narration, the filming and the music. I show that MM and OI have different narrative structures. MM, in common with soap operas, has a dramatic story-line which is character driven; it focuses

on the rise and fall of the Whiskers family which is led by matriarch, Flower. OI, in contrast, focuses more on observing the events that happen to the animal characters who are thrown together on an island; its story-line is akin to a coming-of-age story¹. There are other differences: MM is associated with a research project investigating meerkats' lives while OI is associated with a conservation project. Furthermore, humans are absent in MM but present in OI. This chapter presents a textual analysis of an episode from each programme and provides production details for the programmes.

Chapter 6 focuses on how audiences respond to the narrative structure of MM and OI. In this chapter I argue that the narrative structure takes the form of a human-interest story which highlights the dramatic and emotional aspects of the animals' lives. This human-interest story, in combination with the use of anthropomorphism in the narration, emphasises the human-like dramas in the animals' experience. I also argue that the narration attributes moral values to the animal characters and show that, although audiences emotionally engage with the narratives, they are also critical of them. Furthermore, they do not simply accept the readings offered by the programmes but produce a variety of readings. This gives rise to discussions among viewers about whether humans should intervene to prevent the animals from dying. These discussions raise important ethical questions about the role of humans in relation to the wild animals that are represented in these programmes. I also discuss audience engagement with the intertwining of entertainment and education in the narratives.

Chapter 7 explores audiences' emotional responses to wildlife docu-soaps. It argues that online audiences' emotional responses are rooted in the individualisation of the animal characters, and that these responses can be understood through concepts such as para-social relations and identification that are used to analyse audience responses to other genres (Baym, 2000; Sood, 2002; Briggs, 2010). The characters' names, individual traits and biographies are widely recognized and accepted by audiences, and they post various emotional responses online; these responses are closely connected to their recognition of each character as a distinct individual. I show that this recognition leads viewers to

¹ Coming of age stories focus on a character's transition from childhood to adulthood especially on private issues such as their future and friends (Benyahia, Gaffney & White, 2010).

categorize the animal characters as sharing similarities with humans. Moreover, the individualisation of animal characters leads audiences to identify with and form para-social relationships with them. These concepts were developed to analyse audience responses to other, human-based TV genres and their relevance highlights the similarities in audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps and other genres. However, there are also differences, and I argue that responses cannot be fully understood through these concepts because of the status of wildlife docu-soaps as hybrid genre, the way they incorporate real events into narrativised stories, and the fact that the central characters are animals.

Chapter 8 is the final analytical chapter; it focuses on online communities and media literacy. This chapter discusses how online communities shape audiences' responses in various ways by providing a space for expressing emotional responses, exchanging information, collectively understanding the programmes and practising media literacy. Online communities allow viewers to engage with others who are also interested in wildlife docu-soaps, and they share thoughts and emotions about the animal characters and the programmes. Some viewers create their own content on YouTube, in the form of videos, and these, as well as the programmes, are responded to by other viewers. In addition, audiences exchange information regarding the programmes which provides opportunities for them to learn more about the programmes including the animal characters, the way they live and the research behind the programmes. Such exchanges mean that responses to these programmes are formed collectively. Furthermore, audiences use multiple sources of information or para-texts and encourage each other to look for information from various websites; this enables them to develop and practice media literacy.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, summarises the main arguments and findings of this thesis and discusses how they answer my research questions. My main findings are: that audiences engage actively and critically with the narratives, reproducing, questioning, rejecting and transforming the meanings they offer; that audiences are emotionally engaged and connected to the animal characters, and individualisation is the key to such responses; that the concepts used to analyse soap opera and reality TV are useful in analysing audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps but are not sufficient to explain the full range of responses I have identified; and that audiences' responses are shaped by online communities in various ways and that there are differences in responses on different

online platforms. This chapter, and the thesis, ends with a discussion of how my findings make a contribution to not only the under- researched area of audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps but also to debates about: audiences' responses to representations of animals on TV; their active engagement with narratives; the educational value of wildlife programming; collective understandings in online communities; and the ethics of filming wild animals.

Chapter 2: Changing attitudes towards animals and representations in wildlife documentaries

In this and the following chapter I set my research in the context of changing human-animal relations and related changes in the ways non-human animals are represented in wildlife documentaries. I also discuss research on audiences and their responses to different genres, highlighting the concepts that have been developed to analyse them. I argue that these concepts are useful for analysing audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps because wildlife docu-soaps share features with other genres, such as soap opera and reality TV. I am particularly interested in how emotional connections develop between audiences and animal characters so, in these two chapters, I explore concepts such as individualisation and anthropomorphism which I use to analyse animal representations in wildlife docu-soaps and audiences' emotional responses. In the next chapter I discuss how defining wildlife docu-soaps as hybrid genre helps us understand audience responses and explore audiences in the context of online communities, the development of media literacy and collective audience responses. These ideas are important for my analysis, especially for understanding how audience responses are shaped both by the texts themselves and by online communities.

In this chapter I argue, along with others, that representations of animals are human artefacts and are therefore closely related to changes in society (Burt, 2001). Drawing on the work of Franklin (1999), Bulliet (2005) and others, I outline the social changes that have been identified as important in bringing about changes in human-animal relations. Then I shift my discussion to changing representations of non-human animals in wildlife documentaries, showing that wildlife programming is characterised by a combination of entertainment and spectacle as well as educational and scientific aspects and that individualisation is important in wildlife documentaries. I begin with a discussion of the relationship between human-animal relations and social change.

2.1: The changing nature of human-animal relations

In this section, I explore the way scholars understand human-animal relations and the claims they make about how they are changing. Franklin (1999) and Bulliet (2005) are key authors in this section because of their theorisation of how changes in human-animal relations relate to wider social change. They argue that human-animal relations are becoming more empathetic and that this change has become more widespread during the latter part of the 20th century. Cudworth (2011), in contrast, points out that it is only certain categories of animals that are regarded in this way and that human-animal relations are speciesist and anthropocentric. I look first at those who argue that there has been an increase in empathy towards other animals before pointing out some of the problems with this argument.

Bulliet (2005) theorizes the emergence of more empathetic attitudes towards animals in terms of domesticity and post-domesticity. Post-domesticity, he argues, began in the late 1970s while domesticity was inaugurated with the domestication of animals. Bulliet's theory strongly emphasises a physical separation of human from non-human animals which is critical to understanding post-domesticity and how human-animal relations are changing in a post-domestic world. Franklin (1999) theorizes similar changes using the concepts of modernity and post-modernity. He defines modernity, as beginning with the age of enlightenment and post-modernity as an era beginning roughly around the 1960s in Western countries; his time scale is therefore similar to Bulliet's. Others have argued that greater understanding of and sympathy towards other animals arose with the advent of urbanisation and industrialisation. For example, Thomas (1983) argues that changes in attitudes towards other animals in England in the 18th century were associated with various factors including urbanisation and the increasing popularity of pet keeping, while Ritvo (1987) points to similar attitudinal changes in the 19th century. The changes in human-animal relations that Bulliet and Franklin pinpoint are similar to those identified by Thomas and Ritvo, even though the historical period they focus on differs, and for all of them four aspects of social change are important: socio-economic change, the popularization of science, pet keeping, and animal protection movements. I shall look at

each of these separately though they are, of course, connected. I begin with socio-economic change.

Bulliet (2005) argues that the separation of large domestic animals from most humans, which happened in Western societies in the late 19th century when human populations were concentrated in urban areas, was one of the causes of the shift from domesticity to post-domesticity. Thus socio-economic change in the late 19th and early 20th centuries led to a reduction of animal-drawn transportation and a loss of contact between people and farm animals which implied a distancing from animal slaughter. In the 19th century, people moved into urban areas and slaughterhouses were placed outside of cities where they became increasingly invisible to people's eyes and, in the early 20th century, cars took the place of horse-drawn transport in urban areas. In this way certain categories of animals, such as work and farm animals, were separated from urban populations who became distanced from large domestic animals and unfamiliar with their lives and deaths, while other categories of animals, such as pets, were incorporated into the domestic sphere paving the way for the development of sentimental attitudes towards animals (Bulliet, 2005; see also Berger, 2009). Similarly, Franklin (1999) identifies the period starting from the latter part of the 19th century as critical to human-animal relations because it was characterized by manufacturing innovation. He argues that urbanization occurred due to changes in production, increasing numbers of factories, demands for workers, and work opportunities for people in urban areas; this separated animals from cities with the exception of 'tolerated' species such as pigeons and squirrels (p. 38). But the changes that are most significant for Franklin are those occurring in the 20th century, with the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Franklin argues that the emergence of mass production was associated with instrumental attitudes towards animals and that, in post-Fordism, instrumental attitudes are displaced by more empathetic ones. Despite the similarities between their arguments, Bulliet (2005) is critical of Franklin (1999) as Franklin relies heavily on evidence from Anglo-Saxon cultures. Bulliet, in contrast, draws on a much wider pool of historical evidence. Taken together, however, both theorists argue that socio-economic change influences human-animal relations and, in the latter part of the 20th century, attitudes towards non-human animals became increasingly empathetic.

The popularization of natural science is another factor that contributed to changing perceptions and attitudes towards non-human animals. For instance, Thomas (1983) argues

that the popularization of natural science changed the way animals were categorised, from anthropocentric and instrumentally based categorisations relating to the edibility of animals to a scientific taxonomy which focused on their uniqueness; this shift in categorization influenced people's perceptions. Further, Thomas claims that a rise in natural history and scientific studies at this time challenged the widely held Cartesian view of animals as not possessing any cognitive ability, and instead promoted the idea that animals are conscious, sentient beings. Although Thomas only focuses on changes in Britain, his theory highlights the effect of natural history on changing sensibilities towards non-human animals. Ritvo (1987) also points to the impact of popular science, zoology, natural history and technology. She argues that scientific and technological change influenced people's attitudes towards animals as it reduced their fear of them and enabled them to regard animals with affection. A later effect of primatology and zoological studies of animal behaviour is pointed out by Bulliet (2005) who claims that scientific research in the late 1970s and 1980s changed people's perceptions of non-human animals by highlighting similarities between humans and animals. Bulliet argues that such similarities contribute to humans' increasing guilt about the way animals are treated and that such feelings characterise post-domesticity. This argument, that the rise and popularization of natural history and zoology in Victorian England, and primatology and zoological studies in the 1970s and 1980s, have enabled animals to become objects of affection and empathy, is not uncontested. Writers like Yoon (2009), for example, argue that scientific taxonomy disconnects people from other living beings and Crist (2000) shows that mechanomorphic language has a similar effect.

The rise and popularization of pet keeping is also perceived as marking a significant change in human-animal relations. For example, Thomas (1983) claims increased pet keeping in England in the 17th century amongst the middle-classes made people realise that animals have feelings and that they are distinct individuals and, by the 18th century, pets were increasingly given individual names. Indeed, individualisation is a key to an emotional connection with specific individual animals as has been noted for pets (Charles and Davies, 2008) and farm animals (Wilkie, 2010). The impact of individualisation in relation to the formation of emotional connections between humans and animals will be discussed later in this chapter as it relates to animals in wildlife films. According to Thomas, these attitudinal changes were reflected in people's views of animals, for instance, great affection towards dogs changed biblical views of dogs as filthy scavengers

to thinking of them as faithful and affectionate creatures. Scholars argue that pet keeping challenged the belief that characteristics such as intelligence, reasoning and language are unique to humans (Sanders, 2003a; Thomas, 1983).

Similar changes are noted in the 20th century, particularly since the Second World War with the significant increase in pet keeping in Western societies. Franklin (1999) argues that pets are increasingly seen as family members in post-modernity (see also Amiot & Bastian, 2015) and that they provide stability and security in an age when other social relationships are unstable and unreliable. In addition, he argues that pet keeping blurs the human-animal boundary (Franklin, 1999; see also Charles & Davies, 2008; Charles, 2014; Fox, 2006). This is contested by those such as Tuan (1984) who argues that the pet relationship is based on human control and domination over non-human animals and that, rather than blurring the human-animal boundary, it reinforces it. As a consequence, pet animals have to adapt to their owners' life style and may be confined in a certain space for their owner's convenience, such as a fish bowl, vivarium or house for an indoor cat. In addition, there are a large number of pet animals who are mistreated or abandoned by their owners (Patronek, 1997); indeed, millions are euthanized each year in shelters (Blouin, 2012). Notwithstanding these different analyses of the pet relationship, the fact that large proportions of the population in Western societies live in close proximity to pet animals has, according to Franklin (1999) and Thomas (1983), an impact on human perceptions of animals such that there is an increasing awareness of similarities between animals and humans.

The last element that is critical to changing human-animal relations is animal protection movements which emerged in the 19th century in the UK and US and are identified as a significant sign and driver of change by Thomas (1983) and Serpell (1996). For example, activities that are now seen as cruel, such as cutting animals' tails off for fun and animal killing contests in festivals, were widely accepted and enjoyed prior to the 19th century in Britain as is still the case in some parts of Europe (Casal, 2003). However, from the 19th century onwards, writings on the feelings and moral worth of animals were published; the UK Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824; and acts of parliament legislated against cruelty to horses and cattle in 1822 and against cock fighting in 1845 (Manning & Serpell, 2002). Animal protection movements significantly influenced what is considered acceptable behaviour towards animals and shaped our ideas of what

constitutes animal cruelty (Thomas, 1983). With regard to blood sports, although bans in the UK in the 19th century influenced people's perceptions of how animals should be treated, they mostly targeted working class blood sports, such as dog fighting and cock fighting, rather than fox hunting which was a sport of the landed aristocracy; this reveals that there was a class dimension to the animal protection movements with the urban middle classes wanting to control the animalness of the working class (see Weaver, 2013; May, 2016; Gillett & Gilbert, 2013). There is also a gender dimension with women being more likely than men to be involved in animal protection movements and men being more likely to engage in cruelty towards animals and blood sports such as dog fighting (Evans, Gauthier & Forsyth, 1998). These latter activities have been associated by some with masculinity (Kalof, 2014; Kheel, 2008; Luke, 2007) and, in the 19th century in the US and the UK, animal protection movements also promoted kindness towards animals, especially amongst boys and men and particularly of the working class (Grier, 2006; Franklin, 1999).

While in the 19th century animal protection movements became widespread, in the latter part of the 20th century animal rights movements emerged and influenced people's perceptions of and attitudes towards non-human animals (Franklin, 1999). This is particularly noticeable in the 1970s in Britain when animal rights movements, animal protection organisations, and animal liberation movements enjoyed a rapid increase in membership and public interest (Garner, 1998). The concept of animal rights has purchase in many Western societies and, according to Franklin (1999), it is associated with more empathetic attitudes and influences people's thoughts and behaviour towards other animals. He argues that, increasingly, the exploitation of animals for human gain has attracted criticism, especially from the 1960s and 1970s. He gives the example of opposition to leisure activities involving animals, such as angling, which began to be seen as cruel and human-centric and argues that, in place of these activities, people began to engage in more animal-centred activities such as bird-watching (Franklin, 1999). This argument is, however, applicable to some categories of animals more than others and the treatment of animals, such as farm animals, contradicts Franklin's narrative of progress and enlightenment (Cudworth, 2011); I consider this further below. Nevertheless, Franklin argues that the concept of animal rights was based on and encouraged more empathetic attitudes towards and less anthropocentric treatment of non-human animals.

These changes in human-animal relations are interrelated. Franklin points out that the animal rights movements of the 1970s were both the result of social changes like those noted above and changes in attitudes and, in turn, brought about further change in cultural attitudes towards other animals, and Thomas (1983) points out how the increasing recognition of animals as individuals, through the spread of pet keeping, was connected to the emergence of animal protection movements. Similarly, scientific developments also led to a recognition that humans and animals have a lot in common and to moral concern over how animals are treated which, in turn, fuels arguments that animals should be treated with kindness in the 19th century and granted rights in the 20th century (Bulliet, 2005; Thomas, 1983).

The main argument considered so far is that attitudes towards other animals are becoming increasingly empathetic. For example, Thomas (1983) discusses increasingly empathetic attitudes towards animals in 17th and 18th century England while Serpell (1996), speaking about the 19th century, argues that human society is moving towards more humanitarian and environmentalist attitudes. Franklin (1999) particularly focuses on increasingly empathetic attitudes with the rise of post- modernity starting around the 1960s, and his hypothesis is intertwined with various social changes such as those discussed above. In order to look more closely at this, and in view of the importance of it for my analysis, I focus on how Franklin develops his argument.

Franklin theorizes that empathy and emotional connections to animals are created through three processes in post-modern societies. First is misanthropy – holding negative feeling towards human species such as hatred and distrust: the human- centric use of animals could no longer be justified due to the visible destruction of environments and animal extinctions. Franklin argues that such destruction was seen as a necessary sacrifice for human progress in modernity, but in post-modernity, the faith in human progress was diminishing as it could no longer justify the destruction humans are causing. Consequently, Franklin claims that people draw animals closer to them and regard animals as having a higher moral status than humans who are responsible for the destruction of the planet. Second is ontological security: following Giddens (1990, 1991) and Beck (1992), Franklin argues that social relationships have become unstable in post-modern societies due to changes in social structures. He cites higher divorce rates and changing family forms which lead to instability in social relations and people seeking close emotional connections

and stable relationships with companion animals. The third is risk-reflexivity: according to Franklin, protected and wild areas provide a moral comfort for humans that animals are safe; however, those wild areas such as rainforests and oceans are increasingly being destroyed by humans and no longer offer safety for animals. Franklin argues that this elicits a moral responsibility on the part of humans to protect animals. Bulliet (2005) also identifies more empathetic attitudes towards animals in post-domesticity compared to domesticity. Thus while hunting was accepted as a normal, masculine activity in domesticity, such an activity is criticized in post-domesticity as it 'seems worse than unnecessary. It is wanton, excessive, cruel, vicious, and primitive' (p. 20).

The argument that attitudes towards animals are increasingly empathetic in Western societies is not uncontested and some argue that such attitudes are directed towards particular categories of animals (Cudworth, 2011; Bulliet, 2005). Bulliet mentions that while people are more empathetic towards animals such as pets and wild animals, more distant attitudes are found towards farm animals. For them cruelty has arguably increased in the context of increasing livestock production globally and high consumption of animal products in many first world countries (Machovina, Feeley & Ripple, 2015). The difference between attitudes towards different categories of animal is also pointed out by Thomas (1983) who comments that there is a conflict between the treatment of pets as quasi-human and farm animals as commodities. This creates a potential problem for society:

A mixture of compromise and concealment has so far prevented this conflict from having to be fully resolved. But the issue cannot be completely evaded and it can be relied upon to recur. It is one of the contradictions upon which modern civilization may be said to rest. About its ultimate consequences we can only speculate (p. 303).

This conflict has also been identified by others such as Serpell (1996) who observes the contrast between the way domesticated pigs are treated when farmed for meat and the pampered status of pet animals. Cudworth (2011) goes further, pointing out that all human-animal relations are human-centric and marked by speciesism which she defines as 'discrimination based upon species membership' (Cudworth, 2014, p. 25). She argues that human-animal relations are based on human domination and control over other species,

although she agrees that some categories of animal, such as pets, can be treated well under such conditions.

These arguments highlight that societies have different attitudes towards different categories of animal and question those who argue that there are increasingly empathetic attitudes towards all animals. They also highlight the complexity of human-animal relations in so far as different categories of animals are treated differently and, while some are treated with empathy, instrumental attitudes are still widespread. The next section explores how these complexities are represented in wildlife programming and specifically addresses how representations of animals have changed over the course of the last hundred years. This provides the context for the emergence of the genre of wildlife docu-soaps.

2.2: Wildlife documentaries

In this section I explore changes in media representations of animals, showing that there has been a shift from representations of animals emphasising human control and domination to a more animal-centred and empathetic approach; my discussion centres on wildlife documentaries. First, though, it is important to point out that there is debate about what a wildlife documentary is. As a genre it has undergone significant change which has led Cottle to observe that ‘the “genre” of wildlife programming has, if anything, become decidedly “un-genre-like”’ (Cottle, 2004, p. 83). For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s the Walt Disney Company began to narrativise and anthropomorphise animals and their lives for mass entertainment; this in turn influenced wildlife documentaries (Bousé, 1998) and audiences’ perceptions of what wildlife documentary is (Bagust, 2008). Over time wildlife documentaries have been through significant production and organizational changes (Bousé, 1998; Bagust, 2008). Such changes mean that it is difficult to define wildlife documentary. For example, Horak (2006) says that wildlife documentary is:

a means of entering into a world that was invisible to the human eye, an extension of the physical body of the subject, allowing for the creation of pleasure by bringing animals in their natural habitat closer to humans through the act of visualization in moving image media (p. 459).

While Chris (2006) defines the wildlife genre as:

a prism through which we can examine investments in dominant ideologies of humanity and animality, nature and culture, sex, and race (p. xiv).

These different definitions highlight different aspects of the genre which, as I will show, has changed considerably over the past century. I will look at these changes in this section, and I will look more closely at genre in the next chapter.

It has been argued that the changes undergone by wildlife documentaries arise partly because of the changing cultural context and different ways of relating to animals and partly because of technological developments in the industry (Franklin, 1999; Chris, 2006). Animal related programmes became popular due to the increasing availability of TV and growing interest in animals after World War II in the Western world (Franklin, 1999) and, since the 1980s, the development of cable TV has led to an increasing demand for wildlife programmes in the US (Horak, 2006). Franklin points to both an increase in programmes representing animals and changes in the way they are represented on TV in order to support his argument that there is an increasing educational interest in animals. Similarly, Hastings (1996) claims that people's emotional responses towards animal representations are likely to be due to wider attitudinal changes in society. For instance, he claims that anti-hunting sentiments elicited by the Disney film *Bambi* (1942) reflected wider changes in people's attitudes towards animals in the mid-20th century. In her historical analysis of wildlife documentaries, Chris (2006) argues that wildlife programming has increased during the 20th century. Although positing a connection between the quantity of wildlife TV and an interest in animals could be criticized as a 'fallacy of internalism' (Thompson, 1990, p. 291), and the increasing number of TV programmes which feature live animals might not necessarily reflect an increasing interest in animals among the viewing public, Franklin (1999) points to the connection between increasing and changing representations of animals and changing attitudes towards non-human species.

Along with changing attitudes, the content of wildlife programmes and the way animals are represented were also strongly influenced by changes in the industry (Chris, 2006). Thus the 'production ecology' of wildlife documentaries has been influenced by various wider

changes such as technological change and increasing competition within the industry (Cottle, 2004, p. 82). Here I explore these changes, following Chris (2006) who begins with early wildlife films in the 1900s and 1910s. This is important for my thesis as it allows me to show the changes in the representations of animals that provides the context for the emergence of wildlife docu-soaps.

In the early years of the 20th century, wildlife films were often taken by hunters as travelogues of their expeditions; the focus was clearly on hunters and their trophies (Mitman, 1999; Chris, 2006; Molloy, 2013; Bousé, 1998) and hunters used cameras to record their adventures – they were ‘camera hunters’ (Chris, 2006, p. 3). Chris (2006) as well as Bousé (1998) point out the parallel between the view through the sights of a gun and the camera shots of film makers in early wildlife documentaries. Such travelogues, including the hunting of animals, were one of the most popular sub-genres in early animal filming (Molloy, 2013); they reflected an emotionally distant attitude towards wildlife, symbolising the human conquest of nature, violation and the domination of wild animals by humans (Horak, 2006). Indeed, from the beginning of 20th century, wildlife documentaries, which were mostly hunting and safari films, frequently appeared on the big screen (Bousé, 1998). Bousé mentions that this type of film, with their strong emphasis on storytelling and drama, was more popular in the US than Britain. In Britain, natural history films, which Bousé describes as having an ‘emphasis on research and scientific inquiry’ and a ‘focus on observing the natural world’ (p. 126), were more popular. The effect of Hollywood entertainment on wildlife films became prominent around the 1920s and was related to commercial success (Mitman, 1999). Also, technological changes like the arrival of sound had a positive economic benefit to wildlife films as they could be released again by adding sound to already published films (Molloy, 2013). The early forms of wildlife documentary were, however, modelled on hunting wild animals and were concerned with popularity and financial benefit.

This changed in the post-war years. In Molloy’s words: ‘if hunting and expedition narratives had characterized the early era of wildlife filmmaking, it was the anthropomorphic dramas of an idealised pristine nature that came to dominate in the post-war years’ (Molloy, 2013, p. 170). After the Second World War, the impact of Disney, especially of the True-Life Adventures series, on the wildlife documentary genre was significant (Mitman, 1999; Bousé, 2000; Chris, 2006; Molloy, 2013). Disney went into

wildlife film making due to the financial success of wildlife films such as *True Life Adventures*, and, according to Chris (2006, p. 27), was ‘recasting animal subjects as fully developed, individual, emotional characters, mirrors for their human audience’. I return to this below.

Around the time of the production of *True Life Adventures* (1948), television became widely available in the U.S. and Britain, and the wildlife genre moved into television (see for example Franklin, 1999). At that time, recording equipment was big and it was difficult to achieve good lighting; these constraints meant that it was easier to produce programmes with show-and-tell formats in which animals were handled by humans with explanatory commentaries. There were also programmes such as *Animal Magic* (1962-1983) which focused on zoo animals and how to take care of wild animals in captivity which contrasted with the violent and hunting focused early wildlife films. In the 1950s, many networks started to make wildlife programmes. For instance, in the U.K., the BBC started experimenting with wildlife programmes in 1953 followed by the establishment of the BBC Natural History Unit in 1957 (Cabeza San Deogracias & Mateos-Perez, 2013), and in the U.S., American National Geographic’s nature documentary productions began in 1961. However, Chris argues that the production of wildlife documentaries decreased after the 1960s when the TV industry started to focus on other low-cost, high-rating genres (Chris, 2006). By the late 1970s, however, wildlife programmes re-gained their audience on TV. Part of the reason for this was the increased availability of resources for filming, so more exotic settings were found in programmes as producers were able to travel to such locations. Chris (2006) comments that the use of celebrity scientists also began at around this time. In general, content tended to focus on human presenters with, for instance, stories of heroic conservationists (see Huggan, 2013). Such programmes were also enabled by technological developments, such as portable camera equipment, which allowed film makers to get a closer view of animals in the wild.

Since the 1970s, there have been more animal-centred films and programmes which focus on animals and their daily lives, such as Attenborough’s *Life on Earth* (1979). Such programmes do not centre a human perspective with all its implications of human domination and control, but rather present a more animal-centred, empathetic representation (Franklin, 1999). In keeping with this, animal programmes often took a ‘fly-on-the-wall approach’ (Franklin, 1999, p. 48; Bousé, 2000) and were shot outside of major

human settlements (Horak, 2006). As Horak (2006) comments, many wildlife programmes avoid any presence of human civilization which gives the audience an immediate experience of nature and animals. Similarly, Franklin (1999) suggests that fly-on-the-wall documentaries 'bring the intimate lives of animals closer to humans, decentring humanity by further reducing the perceived distance between humans and animals' (p. 48).

Although wildlife documentaries have become more animal focused compared to previous eras and there is less focus on human violence against animals, there are still ethical questions raised by filming wild animals (Richards, 2014; Mills, 2010). Animals continue to be exploited by the wildlife film industry, and as Collard (2016) argues, wild animals cannot be filmed without intervention. Moreover, Mills (2010) points out that film makers use new technologies to invade animals' privacy. Privacy is often perceived as only applicable to humans, and the privacy of animals during filming is ignored or considered irrelevant even when filming involves private matters such as giving birth and dying. Mills (2010) argues that such an invasion of privacy does not occur when filming human subjects, and thus, is deeply rooted in speciesism. A similar point is made by Sheehan (2008) who comments that wildlife film is 'founded on the metaphysical privileging of human beings over animals' (p. 118). Bousé (1998) points to the difficulties of obtaining consent from animal subjects; in fact non-human animals are powerless to refuse to take part in the filming process. Such arguments highlight continuing human domination and control over animals even though the representation of animals in wildlife programmes has changed. I will pay attention to the ethical questions raised by wildlife docu-soaps in my analysis of audiences' responses (Chapter 6).

This section has shown how representations of animals in wildlife filming have changed over time. There has been a shift from a focus on human domination and control over non-human animals, represented by hunting, in the early years of the 20th century, to a focus on animals themselves and attempts, which emerged in the 1950s, to understand their lives independent of humans. This period also saw the emergence of more anthropomorphic and sentimental representations of animals (Molloy, 2013). Franklin (1999) argues that such changes reflect society's changing perceptions of animals and the emergence of less instrumental attitudes towards them although, as I have shown, this argument is contested. Since the 2000s there has been a greater variety of wildlife documentaries and animal programmes in general.

Animal programmes differ from wildlife documentaries in so far as they feature (often domesticated) animals in specific contexts involving humans, such as veterinary work with zoo animals or pet animals. In the next section, I will show how changes in the 1970s led to the diversification of wildlife documentaries which connects to the emergence of wildlife docu-soaps.

2.2.1: Diversification of wildlife documentaries

During the 1970s wildlife programming diversified as a result of various developments. Thus, in the U.S., the Federal Communication Commission—an independent agency that regulates interstate communications—introduced the Financial Interest and Syndication Rule and the Prime Time Access Rule in 1971; this meant that prime time slots had to be filled with non-network sourced programmes or network-produced educational programmes (Chris, 2006). At the same time there was a rise of environmental awareness caused by activism and public policy developments such as the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Under such regulatory and social conditions, wildlife programmes became a timely topic (Chris, 2006); they often highlighted ecological issues, such as environmental destruction, and the human causes of destruction, such as loss of wildlife species due to loss of habitats (Horak, 2006). This point is relevant to Franklin's (1999) argument about misanthropy and risk-reflexivity: the issues addressed in wildlife programmes can be linked to an increasing awareness of human destruction of wildlife and humanity's responsibility to prevent environmental destruction and protect wildlife. At the end of the 1980s, commercial TV industries such as the Discovery Channel became interested in wildlife programming and, at the same time, subscriptions for cable and satellite TV increased in the U.S. This led, between 1985 and 1996, to a boom in international co-production of wildlife programmes distributed globally, and various wildlife film festivals were set up (Molloy, 2013). Chris (2006) shows that as an expansion of channels and networks occurred, networks started to target particular demographics, and this expansion of the TV industry increased competition.

Following the success of animal programming, animal-focused TV broadcasters were established, such as Animal Planet, which was launched by the Discovery Network in 1996 (Chris, 2002) and provided animal programmes to watch all day long (Horak, 2006).

During this period, wildlife programmes were increasing their range of genres which Kilborn (2006) calls 'diversification' and the range of wildlife and animal-centred programmes expanded substantially.

It has been suggested that these diversification strategies stem from a problem wildlife programmes faced which had two facets: displacement from prime time TV and a fragmentation of audiences. Kilborn (2006) comments that '...TV wildlife has come to share the same fate as other steadily displaced, "serious" documentaries, as more popular forms of programming have colonized the prime-time slots' (p. 1) and Cottle (2004) argues that fragmented audiences caused increasing competition within the industry which, from 2000, forced wildlife programmes to change (Kilborn, 2006). As Keighron (2000) comments: 'the [wildlife] genre has been pushed to the verge of extinction in many primetime slots and is being squeezed everywhere by broadcasters' dwindling budget' (p. 18). More popular entertainment-focused programmes took over prime time slots, as they were able to attract larger audiences and higher ratings and gained audiences in other media such as online TV programmes providing websites. Wildlife programmes needed to compete and, in order to do this, moved from a more "serious", factual documentary style to more entertainment-focused content. Horak (2006) explains, for instance, that Animal Planet has a wide range of programmes including reality TV shows, such as Animal Cops, hospital docu-soaps, such as The Supervet, to contestant competing style programmes like Pet Star. This 'diversification' influenced the development of wildlife programming and gave rise to the emergence of sub-genres such as wildlife docu-soaps.

As well as losing the fight for prime time slots, wildlife programmes also suffered from budget cuts (Keighron, 2000). This is partly because low budget wildlife or animal-centred programmes had been overproduced in the latter part of the 20th century which caused, as Madslien (2004) puts it, 'widespread eco-fatigue among TV viewers' (see also Kilborn, 2006). This was happening in the context of the increasing popularity of more dramatic and spectacle focused programmes which are cheaper to make than other fictional genres because producers do not need to pay for '...actors, directors, writers, or sets' (Mitman, 1999, cited in Chris, 2006, p. 87). In this context, wildlife documentaries also became more dramatic and emotional (Cottle, 2004). Drama was intrinsic to the BBC's big budget, blue-chip programmes, such as Planet Earth (2006) and The Blue Planet (2001), which are 'large-scale, high- budget productions, which usually focus on the drama and majesty of

the natural world' (Gamel, 2012). And, as Kilborn (2006) points out, reality TV, in which he includes human-animal encounter style programmes, also focuses on drama and spectacle:

Such shows offer the promise of giving their viewer customers a “walk on the wild side” - whether to let them witness the “fight or flight” reactions of an animal following a deliberate act of provocation or to gawp voyeuristically at the sometimes violent exchanges between housemates in Big Brother. This kind of dramatization of reality- based material has undeniable attractions for a profit-oriented industry (p. 1).

Thus human-animal encounter style programmes focus on the dramatic aspects of wild animals' lives to attract audiences. Horak notes that narratives in wildlife documentaries create an ““emotional” relationship to animals’ (Horak, 2006, p. 462); I explore this further in Chapter 3.

This section has explored the diversification of wildlife programming subsequent on changes in the regulatory framework and the expansion of TV channels and cable TV in the 1970s and 1980s, developments which were associated with increasing competition and a changing landscape of TV. The diversification of programming, including wildlife programming, led to an emergence of wildlife docu-soaps in the 1990s; examples include Big Cat Diary (1996-2008) and, importantly for this thesis, Meerkat Manor (2005-2009) and Orangutan Island (2007-2009). Through all these changes, however, there remained a tension between the entertainment and educational aspects of wildlife films and programmes. Such tensions will be the focus of the next section.

2.2.2: Education and entertainment in wildlife documentaries

Wildlife programmes are marked by the intertwining of education and entertainment, arising from the need for the genre to entertain in order to attract an audience (Bousé, 1998; Mitman, 1999; Chris, 2006). Entertainment is a broad term and defined differently by different scholars. For instance, Zillmann and Bryant (1994) define it ‘as any activity

designed to delight and, to a smaller degree, enlighten through the exhibition of fortunes and misfortunes of others, but also through the display of special skills by others and/or self' (p. 438). Others, however, point out that what can be defined as entertainment is not straightforward because what is entertaining varies for different individuals. For instance, the voyeurism of reality TV is enjoyed by some but perceived negatively by others (Nabi et al., 2006). In this thesis, I use Scott's (2010) definition which refers to 'the power of an image to excite wonderment in an audience [which] can be related to both the "fantastical" and the "natural" world' (p. 2). I also note that, 'entertainment often informs and educates' (Gray, 2009, p. 3) which points to the educational effects of entertainment and underlines the intertwining of education and entertainment in wildlife documentaries.

Although entertainment and education are not mutually exclusive, how producers balance them varies considerably and has been widely discussed (Bousé, 1998; Chris, 2006). Moreover, the way education is made entertaining in wildlife documentaries is regarded as important because audiences perceive wildlife documentaries to be trustworthy and accurate (for further discussion see below), like other genres such as news (ITC/BSC, 2003), even though representations of animals are manipulated and edited to entertain audiences. This debate has a long history and wildlife films in the 1900s were not immune. As Mitman (1999) notes,

the difficulty in distinguishing between wholesome education and bawdy entertainment was a problem faced by educators, scientists, and philanthropists who wished to cultivate natural history film for a more serious-minded audience [...] Emotional drama was necessary, but the question of whether such drama had been authentically captured in the wild or had been created through artifice in order to elicit thrills and generate mass appeal increasingly became a subject of inquiry and concern (p. 10).

Chris (2006) explains that in the 1920s and 1930s, there was pressure on wildlife film makers to make programme content more scientific and educational in order to attract funding. The programmes had to have images of wildlife with ethnographic accounts and be supported by scientific institutions, in order to popularize scientific ideas. Behind such pressure were scientific organizations such as The American Museum of Natural History

which hoped to use such films to promote conservation issues and museum projects. However, according to Chris, fakery and unethical practices in the wildlife TV industry, such as using footage of zoo animals and presenting them as wild, or injuring animals prior to filming so that they did not move, led to the discontinuation of funding and drove wildlife programmes to focus on more sensational aspects in order to attract an audience and be commercially successful (Chris, 2006; Louson, 2018). Interestingly, Molloy (2013) notes that the travelogue wildlife films of the early 1900s were frequently perceived as educational by an elite audience, educators and reviewers, even though they focused on the spectacle of trophy hunters killing animals, while Mitman (1999) points out that, in the early 1900s, animal films were both educational and entertaining. This highlights the intertwining of spectacle, entertainment and education in wildlife films from their early years.

Although wildlife documentaries and representations of animals have changed since the early years of the 20th century, the weight given to entertainment within the genre is still debated with some arguing that entertainment detracts from the educational value of natural history (Griffiths, 2008) and wildlife documentaries (Dingwall & Aldridge, 2006) and others arguing that spectacle is central to them and encourages audiences to learn about wildlife (Cowie, 2011). Dingwall and Aldridge (2006), for instance, claim that the fact that blue-chip wildlife documentaries are entertaining restricts their potential educational value, and Scott (2010) argues that the combination of entertainment and spectacle ‘brings its own problems, as the spectacle of the visual image often overshadows the very history being explored’ (p. 34).

Others argue that entertainment is at the core of wildlife documentaries (Bousé, 1998, 2003) and that it facilitates audiences’ learning through ‘affective knowing’ (Louson, 2018; Cowie, 2011). Indeed, sensationalism, a specific form of entertainment, is argued to be key to wildlife documentaries. For example, Kilborn (2006) comments that the focus of wildlife programmes on sensational aspects of animal behaviours is ‘a generic requirement’ to attract an audience and Bousé (1998, 2003) argues that sensationalism is a recognisable convention and code of the genre. This is echoed by Cottle (2004): ‘The wildlife genre has always had to deal with ‘adult’ themes of sex, violence and death; it goes with the territory’ (p. 93; see also Bagust, 2008). There are some, though, who argue that a focus on scientific accuracy can conflict with a focus on sensationalism; for instance,

Horak (2006) comments that a focus on sensationalism to attract an audience ‘never strictly documents ... animal activity’ (p. 461).

Horak (2006) is also critical of what she terms Disneyfication for similarly misrepresenting wild animals, arguing that Disneyfication represents animals as ‘reduced images’ which means that they are compromised. Moreover footage is edited to fit into the image of nature that Disney aims to create, thus images of animals are edited to look like Disney cartoon characters and this is combined with anthropomorphic narration. She points to the way Disney’s wildlife documentaries often highlight the humorous and emotional aspects of animal lives ‘creating a harmonious vision of nature’ (Horak, 2006, p. 466). Others are also critical of such depictions, arguing that they neglect aspects of animal lives, such as killing, death and conflict and that they are therefore ‘fantasy nature’ (Cabeza San Deogracias & Mateos-Perez, 2013, p. 573). Of course, all documentaries are selective in what they represent, but what is particular about Disneyfication is that animals are represented as peacefully co-existing in a harmonious world. Indeed, ‘animals are the main characters, each attributed with humanised traits and personalities’ (Molloy, 2013, p. 170). The debate about education and entertainment underpins these arguments with Cabeza San Deogracias and Mateos-Perez (2013) commenting that such representations are more entertainment than education focused; at the same time they recognise that other, ‘less naïve’ (p. 574) wildlife documentaries also use the same filming and editing processes. Notwithstanding these criticisms, Disney style wildlife filming became popular due to its wide audience appeal and commercial success (Chris, 2006). Indeed, Bousé (1998) argues that entertainment is a recognizable convention and code of wildlife documentary, and Disney’s focus on entertainment played a central role in this as it made wildlife films popular globally. This debate reflects differing views on the intertwining of education and entertainment in wildlife documentaries and brings into focus that entertainment and education are not so easily separated. It also raises questions about realism and the wildlife documentary genre. These are issues that are central to my thesis and that I explore further in the next chapter.

The intertwining of fact and fiction, education and entertainment, in wildlife programming sometimes has consequences for audience behaviour which is not unrelated to the public perception that documentaries reflect “truth” or “reality”. Indeed, Molloy (2011) quotes an industry study which showed that 91% of respondents in the UK said that wildlife

documentaries are always or most of the time truthful. Such perceptions can influence people's interactions with animals. For instance, Bousé (2003) refers to a case in which visitors to Yellowstone National Park regarded wild animals, such as bears, as harmless and they expected to feed and pet them because of what they had seen on TV. Although such perceptions could be formed from other animal representations, Bousé emphasizes the strong influence of wildlife documentaries on people's perceptions of and interactions with non-human animals thereby reinforcing the requirement that they be educational and realistic in what they represent. The perception of documentary as truth-telling is related to genre, and realism in television programs will be further discussed in the next chapter.

The use of editing in the making of wildlife programmes is also a topic of debate, particularly when it combines completely different sequences to make it appear as if they are one continuous incident. This practice has raised questions about both its accuracy and its effect on audiences. For instance, Kilborn (2006) mentions that character and story driven programmes tend to focus on the dramatic and entertaining aspects of animal behaviours and that this sometimes results in staged or edited sequences while Horak (2006) points out that such editing often puts together spatially and temporally unrelated footage:

nature filmmakers produce at very high shooting ratios, then construct specific events through editing, utilizing images which may indeed have no spatial and temporal relationship to each other and may involve dozens of animals, rather than the one example ostensibly being depicted (p. 462).

Molloy (2011) also notes the use of captive animal footage in wildlife documentaries which is made to look like footage of wild animals in their natural habitat:

The problem was thus one of identifying where the boundary lay between the realism of wildlife film making and the highly constructed performances that could be found in dramatic live-action animal films (p. 66).

She points to the dilemma faced by wildlife documentary producers between using only footage taken in the wild or using unrelated footage and set ups to meet the audience's expectations and the demands of the commercial industry. Although editing in general is an inevitable part of programme making, editing which combines different footage to make it appear as if it is one continuous sequence, or presents a captive animal or staged footage as if it had been filmed in the wild, puts a question mark over the authenticity of the animal behaviour represented and raises ethical questions. Louson (2018), however, points out that these 'criticisms of fakery, staged, scientific inaccuracy, and use of anthropomorphism ...this critique of natural history documentary is both motivated by and tends to reinforce a clear distinction between entertainment and education' (p. 18). It is therefore part of the debate about the purpose of wildlife documentary and whether it is primarily entertaining or educational, a debate that Louson (2018) argues neglects the educational value of entertainment.

In this section I have explored debates about education and entertainment in wildlife documentaries. I agree with Louson (2018) that they are fundamentally intertwined and that entertainment is itself educational. This co-existence of entertainment and education in wildlife docu-soaps will be a key concern throughout this thesis.

2.2.3: Individualising animals

It has been argued that individualisation and/or anthropomorphism are critical to the formation of emotional connections between humans and non-human animals (Serpell, 1996; Charles & Davies, 2008; Wilkie, 2010) and that wildlife documentaries employ both. As the emotional connections between audiences and the animals represented in wildlife documentaries is addressed by one of my research questions, it is important to explore the way animals are individualised and anthropomorphised in wildlife programming. Here I focus on individualisation, I discuss anthropomorphism in Chapter 3, and draw out the links between individualisation, entertainment and education.

While individualisation characterises many wildlife documentaries, and is a particular feature of wildlife docu-soaps, some wildlife programming pays less attention to individual animals, seeing them as representative of their species rather than as individuals with their

own characters and personalities. This happens in *Wild Amazon* (2015) produced by National Geographic where animals' behaviour is narrated as being typical of the species rather than arising from individual characteristics. For instance, in the sequence of a Jaguar hunting a turtle, the jaguar is simply referred to as a jaguar, and their appearance as well as behaviour are narrated as typical of the species; the narrator does not tell viewers about the jaguar's character and personality and makes observations such as 'jaguars have one of the strongest bites of all big cats' (*Wild Amazon*, 2015). In contrast, programmes like *Meerkat Manor* individualise animals, but still inform their audience about the animals' habitats and behaviours. In *Meerkat Manor*, each animal character has an individual name and their behaviours are portrayed as their own personal actions. The programme focuses on meerkats as a species, but shows a variety of individuals who are all unique in terms of their personalities and biography.

Although some wildlife documentaries incorporate intimate images of animals, Mills (2017) comments that the individuality of animals is often absent and their behaviours are portrayed as typical expressions of a whole species. Mills (2015) claims that observing animals in this way derives from the scientific categorizations and taxonomies that wildlife documentaries use to represent animals and points out that if such an approach was used in human documentaries, it would be problematic.

This neglect of individuality seems to be most prevalent in documentaries that claim to be scientific (Chris, 2006; Davies, 2000). Mills (2015) comments that wildlife documentaries often use scientists and scientific research in order to legitimize their claims to be scientific and authentic. For instance, the BBC Natural History Unit has a strong emphasis on science and field observation (Richards, 2013) and, in the 1950s and 1960s, wildlife programme presenters included Peter Scott, who was a conservationist, and David Attenborough, who trained in the natural sciences. Moreover, wildlife documentaries often rely on science in order to substantiate their claims that they produce factual programmes with educational value (Mills, 2015).

While animals' individuality is neglected in some wildlife programmes that appear to be scientific, individualisation mobilizes people's emotions. The individualisation of animals has historically been more prevalent in other forms of media, such as children's story

books or news stories. It encourages people to consider an animal as a unique individual with their own history, personality and cognition (Sanders, 2003a) as well as eliciting emotional responses (Akerman, 2019); this challenges assumptions that non-human animals are dispensable units (Stibbe, 2001). Forming an attachment to individual animals is also the reason why scientists are discouraged from giving names to their laboratory animals (Philips, 1994). As Morton (2002) puts it: ‘A wondrous thing happens when an animal moves from population status to individual standing: it can no longer be treated with impunity’ (p. 148). In contrast, referring to animals in plural form or as representatives of their species, and ignoring their individuality, is connected to emotional detachment from animals (Regan, 1996). Of course, individualised animals still can be treated badly as is the case of pet animals mentioned earlier in this chapter, but the point here is the effect of individualisation in eliciting an emotional response to representations of animals.

Because of the effectiveness of individualisation in inducing emotional responses in audiences, many wildlife documentaries employ this method in their representation of animals. This was the case with Disney’s wildlife films and can now be found in wildlife docu-soaps. For example, in the earliest wildlife docu-soap (Richards, 2014) *Big Cat Diary* (1996-2019), the most important big cats often have names, and their individual qualities and stories are told by presenters. Kilborn (2006) draws attention to the ‘character and story-driven modes of presentation’ in wildlife programmes and Chris (2006) observes that individualisation was a way of selling programmes. Franklin also notes the production of animal-focused programmes, such as Attenborough’s *Life on Earth* (Franklin, 1999), which individualise animals, highlight aspects of animal lives that are sentimental and reduce the emotional and symbolic distance between audience and animals.

The function of individualisation in mobilizing emotions is important and, as I will show in my analysis, referring to animals as a species or group does not do this nearly as effectively. Although individualisation is associated with entertainment, emotional appeals to an audience are especially useful when programmes aim to promote animal-related issues such as conservation. Moreover, a wildlife documentary can employ individualisation at the same time as being educational. Individualisation is one of the key concepts used in this thesis and will be found throughout my analysis and discussion.

2.3: Conclusions

This chapter has focussed on how changes in human-animal relations have influenced representations of wild animals in wildlife programmes. I have explored the factors enabling emotional connections between humans and non-human animals and have argued that individualisation is critical to this. This is explored further in the next chapter where I show that animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps are individualised through the way the story is constructed and narrated. I have also shown that, while empathetic attitudes towards some categories of animals are associated with social change, other categories of animals do not elicit emotional responses from humans. It is pets who, more than any other category of animal, are enmeshed in emotional relationships with humans; other categories of animal, such as farm animals or vermin, because they are rarely individualised, are not perceived in the same way (Wilkie, 2010; Sealey and Charles, 2013). This is important for considering the different responses to different categories of animals in wildlife docu-soaps and relates to my argument that when animals are represented as part of a group rather than individualised, viewers are unlikely to form emotional attachments with them. As I have shown, wildlife programming combines these elements in different ways and, in my analysis of audience responses, I explore how they contribute to the complexities of responses to wildlife docu-soaps. Finally, this discussion provides a context for the emergence of the hybrid genre of wildlife docu-soaps which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Wildlife docu-soaps, audiences and online communities

In this chapter, I discuss wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre and the relationship of audiences, fans and online communities to TV programmes. I explain how genres are fluid and constantly changing and explore the way wildlife docu-soaps share features with different genres including wildlife documentaries, soap opera, reality TV and docu-soaps; I suggest that they can be understood as a hybrid genre. I then turn my attention to an analysis of audiences and fans, exploring the way audiences construct para-social relations and identify with media characters, how they interact within online communities, and how media literacy is developed within these communities. Throughout I aim to identify concepts which may be helpful to analyse audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. The chapter ends with an outline of the analytical framework deployed in the rest of this thesis.

3.1: What is genre?

Genre refers to predictable and recognizable characteristics of media products, such as comedy, horror and drama (Fluton et al., 2006) and means that audiences know what to expect from a text (Creeber, 2015). It is, however, important to problematise genre as genres, in some senses, have to be taken ‘at face value’ (Mittell, 2004, p. 2), with audiences accepting that genre refers to established categories without further exploring their complexities. In this section I discuss the concept of genre and its different interpretations.

Genre is familiar to and identifiable by audiences; it can be defined, or at least recognised, by its structure, its setting (like hospital dramas), its effect on audiences, such as comedy genres (e.g. sitcoms) which are supposed to be funny and make audiences laugh (Fluton et al. 2006), and its narrative structure (Lacey, 2000). Some genres have stereotypical characters, a distinct style or certain actors associated with them (Desai & Basuroy, 2005); an example is Jason Statham who is often featured in action films. These methods of identification suggest that audiences possess knowledge about the distinct features of genres. Moreover, a genre may be associated with certain technical conventions such as the use of

specific camera shots and lighting. For example, close-up shots are often used to generate an emotional and intimate effect and can be found in genres such as soap opera (Burton, 2000).

Mittell (2004), however, argues that genre is more complicated and there are other ways to categorize them than settings, structure and effects on audiences.

we need to look beyond the text as the locus for genre, locating genres within the complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences and historical contexts. Genres transect the boundaries between texts and context, with production, distribution, promotion, exhibition, criticism, and reception practices all working to categorize media texts into genres (p. 10).

His quotes highlight the complexity of genres which are constituted and intertwined with a range of para-textual factors. Para-text is

...the term to describe all those things that surround the actual literary work that we may be inclined to consider not wholly a part of it, but that nevertheless append themselves to it, whether physically, as with book covers, prefaces, afterwords, and choices over paperstock and typeface, or conceptually, as with reviews, interviews, ads, and promotional materials (Brookey & Gray, 2017, p. 101).

Moreover, distinctions between genres are blurred as genres are fluid. For instance, genres change their conventions and characteristics over time and can overlap, as with action-horror and romantic-comedy. These hybrid genres are especially difficult to define as they share characteristics with a range of other genres.

Conceptualising genre as something that changes and develops is proposed by various scholars. Neale (1990) claims that genre is 'best understood as a process' (p. 165) and observes that genres change over time, with elements being added or eliminated, shared or overlapping. Indeed, Corner (2002) suggests that documentary genres exist in relationship

with other genres, a point that is relevant for all genres, while Mittell (2004) argues that 'genres do not operate by following these clear nesting categorizations, but rather through cycles of evolution and redefinition' (p. 11). Miller (2016) takes up the notion of genres evolving, suggesting that we look at them through the lens of evolution; this highlights the continuous development of genre from already existing practices. This way of thinking about genre is helpful to understanding wildlife documentary because, as I showed in Chapter 2, wildlife documentary has evolved over time (e.g. Chris, 2006) but there is no conventional style that can be identified through this evolution (Cottle, 2004). There are some elements of wildlife documentary, such as its focus on wild animals and their habitats, that are retained, however, and this is what enables it to be defined as a genre. Indeed, '...by mid-twentieth century the term 'wildlife film' had entered into common usage' (Molloy, 2013, p. 165) and its meaning was culturally recognised.

While acknowledging the fluidity and flexibility of genre, thinking about it in terms of categories is still useful and Mittell observes that genre is 'both active process and stable formation' (Mittell, 2004, p. 17). Although, genres change over time, there are aspects which are recognized in specific cultural and historical moments. In the case of documentary, Austin and de Jong (2008) argue that '...individual viewers will have their own preconceptions and expectations of material labelled 'documentary' (either by themselves or by others)' although 'they may or may not accord with more established definitions' (p. 3), and they claim that those definitions are created by factors such as advertising and discourses on documentaries. Ward (2005) also argues for the usefulness of categories as an analytical framework for understanding the documentary genre while acknowledging interactivity between the categories. On this point, although Feuer (1992) questions the distinction between genre and sub- genre by arguing sub-genres are also genres, she argues that sub-genre is useful to highlight the changing nature of genres and how they develop from and relate to each other.

Because genres are changing and overlap, hybrid genres have become a norm in the industry (Kilborn, 2006). In the case of reality TV, for instance, Hill (2005) comments that '...reality programmes draw from existing television genres and formats to create novel hybrid programmes' (p. 14). In this thesis I understand wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre (Richards, 2014) because they retain aspects of wildlife documentary while sharing elements common to other genres such as soap opera. In the next section I therefore

discuss the various genres that wildlife docu-soaps draw on, namely documentary, soap opera, reality TV and docu-soap.

3.2: Mixing genres: documentary, soap opera, reality TV and docu-soap

Wildlife docu-soaps share features with other genres, combining elements of wildlife documentary and docu-soap while docu-soap itself shares features of other genres such as soap opera, documentary and reality TV shows. In this section I explore the way these elements appear in other genres and how they contribute to the hybrid genre of wildlife docu-soaps. I begin with a discussion of documentary.

3.2.1: Documentary

The genre of documentary is loosely defined and fluid; there are many different types of documentary (Vaughan, 1999; Hill, 2008) and its form is always changing (Ward, 2006; Corner, 2008); Arthur (2005) even argues that documentary is a mode of production rather than a genre. All these claims may be true as, ‘What we understand by “documentary” is always dependent on the broader context of the kinds of audiovisual documentation currently in circulation’ (Corner, 2015, p. 147). This quote highlights the way that defining a genre takes place in comparison with and contrast to other genres and that definitions are constantly changing and evolving.

Indeed, Bruzzi (2006) argues that documentaries are shifting from more traditional observational documentary, such as *The War Room* (1993), to documentaries with a more relaxed boundary between documentary and fiction, like *Wife Swap* (2004). This highlights the fluidity and “fuzziness” of boundaries and Ward (2006) goes so far as to suggest that documentary studies should focus more on this fuzziness than fixed categories; this is something I take up in this thesis.

3.2.2: Soap opera

Soap opera tends to be character driven (Fluton et al, 2006), featuring powerful female characters who are at the centre of the story (Brown, 1994), and has dramatic story-lines (Fluton et al, 2006). Brunsdon (2000) comments that dramatic events are incorporated into a long time- span so that sensationalism is minimized, and soaps highlight individual characters' stories. Soap opera is characterised by multiple, simultaneous story lines which switch between characters (Campbell et al., 2000; Brown, 1994) while the setting and social context remain the same (Fluton et al., 2006). For instance, in the British soap opera *Coronation Street* (1960 – present), the story revolves around a street in a fictional town called Weatherfield, and involves interactions among the residents of the street, including female characters who are represented as powerful and independent (Brown, 1994). It also tends to have long- term, continuous story lines and an in-programme history (Ford, 2008) which the audience becomes familiar with (Geraghty, 1991). As soaps run for a long time, they take a serial form and there is often no closure - a definite, clear ending of a story which many other forms of narratives have (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Brunsdon, 2000) - and the story is ever-expanding (Brown, 1994). For example, *Coronation Street* and another British soap opera, *Eastenders*, which was first broadcast in 1985, are both still on air. Importantly, soap opera has an episodic nature (Geraghty, 2010) and is 'demonstrably one of the most narratively complex genres of television drama whose enjoyment requires considerable knowledge by its viewers' (Allen, 2014 quoted in Ducey, 2015, p. 222). These characteristics of soap opera lead to different viewing experiences between fans and non-fans as fans have more knowledge of the characters, histories and plots which are essential to fully comprehend soaps (Brown, 1994; Warhol, 1998). This understanding gives narratives more meaning than a single episode can provide (Geraghty, 1991) allowing the audience to speculate about what might happen in the future.

Audiences' identification with soap opera characters has a distinctive pattern. Many genres, especially when they are fictional, have a main character with whom audiences are encouraged to identify. However, Brown (1994) comments that the appearance of multiple characters at the same time in soap opera means that,

rather than identifying with one character through thick and thin, the reader² recognizes many possibilities in character types – the villainess, the ingenue, the good mother – but at the same time chooses to be involved with these characters. In this reading practice, an audience member will involve her- or himself with a character but will draw back if what happens to that character becomes uncomfortable (p. 52).

Audiences, therefore, do not stick with one character, rather, their identification shifts depending on the plot as characters develop over time, and their relationships, positions and even personalities change.

Soap opera also focuses on the private sphere of society and is one reason why soap opera is often perceived as a ‘women’s genre’ (Brown, 1994; Geraghty, 1991; Brunsdon, 2000). It not only focuses on issues and events related to the domestic sphere, but place within soap opera is often connected with home and tied to family and close community (Brown, 1994). For example, many soap operas are based on particular families, such as the Carringtons and the Colbys in *Dynasty* (1981-1989), or close communities, such as *Coronation Street*. As the genre focuses on the private sphere, it is not surprising that characters’ conversations focus on families.

Stories in soap operas are based on family life, and dramatic events take place within the family sphere; this also highlights women’s role at home and the importance of gendered work such as emotional labour and domestic work (Geraghty, 1991). Indeed, soap opera’s stories often focus on intimate conversations among characters (Brown, 1994; Fluton et al., 2006). Moreover, soap presents visible female sexuality which is often invisible in popular media (Brown, 1994). Brunsdon (2000) comments on feminists’ concerns about soap opera’s representations of a normative view of femininity constructed by a patriarchal view of women. Although soap opera depicts strong female figures (Geraghty, 1991), representations remain gendered as they are based on a normative view of the family, gender relations and motherhood.

² Brown uses ‘reader’ to refer to the audiences of soap opera in this quote.

Gender is important not only in soaps but in all media genres, including wildlife documentaries, and gender stereotypes are often reproduced. A stereotype is an over-simplified and over-generalized belief or idea about a particular group of people. More specifically, gender stereotypes - as a generalised preconception of the characteristics or attributes that “ought” to be possessed by men and women - can contribute to a belief system that shapes how women and men behave. Indeed, Mastro, Behm-Morawitz and Kopacz (2008) analysed the impact of gender stereotypes in films, and found that they influence people’s assumptions about gender roles. Furthermore, Lauzen et al. (2008) found that both male and female characters are frequently assigned gender stereotypical roles in prime time TV programmes. Gender stereotypes are connected to a range of effects such as an increasing tolerance towards sexual harassment (Lee et al., 2010), and increasing sexist attitudes among men (Cobb & Boettcher, 2007). There is also evidence that TV characters and their social roles have a strong influence on the construction and reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Lauzen et al., 2008). Gadassi and Gati (2009), for instance, found there was an influence of gender stereotypes on career choices: men preferred more stereotypical “masculine” jobs while women preferred more “feminine” occupations although it is unlikely to be due solely to media representations. Moreover, children’s concepts of gender can be influenced by stereotypical representations of gender roles in films (Martin et al., 2002), television (Leaper, 2000) and media more generally (Graves, 1999) with studies finding gender stereotypes and sexism in Disney films (Wiserma, 2001; Lacroix, 2004). In subsequent chapters I will explore whether wildlife docu-soaps reproduce normative assumptions about gender.

In this section I have identified some key features of soap opera which are relevant for understanding the genre wildlife docu-soap; I now turn to reality TV.

3.2.3: Reality TV

Reality TV is difficult to define (Gorton, 2009) and tends to be ‘a catch-all phrase’ (Kilborn, 1994, p. 423; Johnson-Woods, 2002); indeed Kavka (2012) argues that ‘there is probably not a single feature that is shared by all of the programmes which fall under the rubric of “reality TV”’ (p. 1) and this variation in the genre is increasing (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). For instance, Hill (2005) points out that reality TV includes do-it-yourself lifestyle programmes like *Changing Rooms* (1996 - 2004) as well as reality talent shows like *Popstars USA* (2001) and *I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here* (2002 -2017); the latter

has a reality game format involving celebrity contestants. Furthermore, Hill (2005) remarks that ‘almost any entertainment programme about real people comes under the umbrella of popular factual television’ (p. 14). For purposes of my analysis I define reality TV as a genre which ‘hold[s] in common an emphasis on the representation of ordinary people and allegedly unscripted or spontaneous moments that supposedly reveal unmediated reality’ (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 10). In the simplest terms, reality TV represents ordinary people (supposedly), it reflects reality (this is discussed further below), and covers various topics related to personal lives such as sex and family (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). An example of this is *Cheaters* (2002 – present) where each episode follows ‘ordinary’ people who suspect their partner is cheating on them. There is, however, a debate about the ordinariness of participants with the atypical qualities of families in *Wife Swap* (Holmes & Jermyn, 2008) and the notion of ‘star performer’, which ‘transcended and achieved an identity beyond the series that created them’ (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 135), undermining this claim. The importance of the ‘unscripted or spontaneous moment’ has been associated with reality TV since its beginnings in the 1990s. Subsequently, reality TV diversified (Hill, 2005) but shows commonly have multiple participants and the unscripted and spontaneous remain important. The way audiences identify with individuals is similar to audience responses to soap opera.

[Soap opera’s] ability to interact imaginatively with a number of ‘realistic’ personas and their experiences on screen certainly seems to correspond with some of the structural characteristics of reality TV. Reality TV shows which offer a temporary community of individuals, for example, enable the viewer to occupy a range of roles, shifting, changing and doubling up on a variety of subject positions (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 102).

This flexible identification of viewers with a range of subject positions is something that I explore in relation to wildlife docu-soap audiences. In addition, reality TV and soap opera are structurally similar due to their serial nature (e.g. Geraghty, 2005; Ang, 2013; Holmes, 2004). These shared formats make it difficult to distinguish reality TV from other genres and Hill (2005) metaphorically terms this sharing, ‘cannibalising’. The mixing of genres is underlined further by Nichols (1994) who comments that soap opera is categorically close to reality TV, Biressi and Nunn (2005) who emphasize soap opera’s structural similarity to

docu-soaps, and Hill (2005) who points out that docu-soaps are categorically akin to fly-on-the-wall documentaries (see Chapter 2).

3.2.4: Docu-soap

From the early 1990s the docu-soap format was increasingly popular and this is reflected in the BBC's rapidly increasing number of docu-soaps in the UK (Kilborn, 2006). Docu-soap shares elements with documentaries but includes a focus on the dramatic, a feature that it shares with wildlife docu-soaps. Hill (2005) defines docu-soap as 'a combination of observational documentary, and character-driven drama' (p. 27), an example of this is *Children's Hospital* (1993 – 2003) which is a fly-on-the-wall documentary focusing on the dramas of patients and their parents. The programme centres on the characters and their interactions, and this creates the dramatic and personal stories that drive the narrative. Similarly, Kilborn, Hibberd and Boyle (2001) define docu-soaps as:

almost always character-centred and [they] rely primarily for their appeal on the performance of individual characters with whom members of the audience are encouraged to identify, just as with characters in a fictional soap (p. 383).

They add that they are 'lighter, less demanding forms of factual entertainment' (p. 383); an example of this is *Vets in Practice* (1997 -2002) which follows young vets in training, focusing on particular individuals and their personal stories. Docu-soaps concern real people who actually exist and are not actors and, in this sense, they are like documentaries, but, as with soap operas, the stories tend to focus on drama and individual characters. Indeed, docu-soap is 'constructed around a small group of charismatic characters in a common endeavour' (Hamann, 1998, p. 6 quoted in Bruzzi, 2006, p. 78), and it often focuses on a place where those characters interact (Bruzzi, 2006).

This section discussed the different genres which wildlife docu-soaps draw from and which contribute to their hybridity. Other genres such as documentary, as I showed earlier, are also increasingly seen as fuzzy and fluid. Indeed, it is not only genres that are fluid or hybrid, but, as Bruzzi (2006) points out, the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred.

This problematises the realities that are constructed in different genres, a topic that is important for this thesis. Hence, the next section will discuss representations of the real in the context of exploring the factual and fictional aspects of TV.

3.3: What is real in TV? The fact-fiction continuum

How TV programmes, particularly documentaries, represent reality relates to questions about the relationship between fact and fiction and has been understood in different ways. As Fairclough (1995) puts it: 'Media texts...constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them' (p. 103-104). This suggests that reality in television is constructed. Thus, seeing wildlife on TV is different from seeing it with the naked eye: a camera can get closer to wild animals than we are physically able to, shots exclude as well as include, scenes are edited, and the narrator interprets what the images mean, thereby telling us a story. Moreover, the reality constructed in TV programmes is specific to them and viewers may perceive it to be real even when they are aware a programme is fictional. For instance, in Cranny-Francis and Gillard's (1990) work on soap opera, they found that audiences perceive representations in soap opera as real when they can relate to the programmes at a personal level. Their study also highlighted that the perception of reality in soap opera is based on consistency and believability in a way that makes sense given the setting and the characters. This way of representing reality is not factual but symbolic and,

'as a symbolic realm it is very far from 'reality' and much closer to being a metaphor for television itself – intimate, immediate, rooted in the everyday and yet highly produced and packaged for mass consumption' (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 21).

The construction of reality in television is closely connected to the conventions of genres and, even within the documentary genre, different styles relate to and construct the real through different techniques and conventions (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). Some reality TV programmes, such as 'Vets', employ conventions which are close to documentary, conveying a sense of truth and accuracy by presenting 'real' people in their occupations (Hill, 2005) while more personalised documentary and reality TV, constructs the real through private emotions and immediacy such as individuals' trauma, personal loss, emotional pain, death and survival (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). For soap opera, techniques and

conventions are different. Geraghty (1991), for instance, comments that British soap opera constructs a sense of reality through a focus on a particular region, such as Manchester, with representations of regional characteristics such as dialect and stereotypical personalities. Moreover, audiences' perception of the reality constructed in soap opera is related to their understanding of the genre and what is plausible or possible within soap opera conventions (Brown, 1994). These arguments highlight that how reality is constructed is different in different genres; viewers critically judge what is real or not in television programmes, but such judgements are connected to their understanding of genres and conventions. In fact, for reality TV, Hill (2005) observes:

‘...the classification of reality TV in relation to ‘reality’ is connected with audience understanding of the performance of non-professional actors in the programmes, and the ways ‘real people’ play up to the cameras’ (p. 54).

Those discussions point to the importance of genre in relation both to the reality constructed in TV programmes and to the way audiences understand the real in television.

If we accept that reality is constructed differently according to the conventions of genre, it is difficult to maintain a clear distinction between fact and fiction; indeed scholars argue that fact and fiction are not mutually exclusive but exist on a continuum, and television programmes can sit anywhere on that continuum. Nicholas (1994) calls the line between fiction and non-fiction a ‘blurred boundary’, and Roscoe and Hight (2001) ‘prefer to think about documentary as existing along a fact– fictional continuum, each text constructing relationships with both factual and fictional discourses’ (p. 7). While documentary aims to be the most authentic representation of reality, it ‘will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational’ (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 4). Briggs (2010) argues further that science itself does not provide access to unmediated reality: ‘...the belief in objective truth and impartiality, in scientific rationality, and in formal and abstract knowledge as providing reliable and unmediated access to reality is deeply flawed’ (p. 7). These comments underline that it is not possible to represent the unmediated ‘real’ and that reality in documentaries, as in other genres, and even in science, is constructed.

In line with this, some argue that the ‘creative treatment’ (Grierson, 1993, p. 7–9) used in documentaries does not invalidate the reality they represent. In Chapter 2, I discussed how

wildlife documentaries use staging and editing; these practices can blur the boundary between fact and fiction and, because of this, are seen by some as problematic. Bennett (2000), for instance, argues that re-constructions are ‘inferior to the truth’ and sees them as entirely fictional. Bruzzi (2006), however, finds this view problematic and Ward (2006) argues that a documentary can both use creative treatment and represent reality. Thus, some documentaries use animation or CGI, but still represent something of the real and are still documentaries (Ward, 2006).

Likewise, reality TV blurs the boundaries between fiction and fact: expressed emotions are raw and real in the sense that the anger and sadness are often not staged but, at the same time, the individual involved may be constructing a fictional persona in front of the camera (Biressi & Nunn, 2005). Especially for programmes which are ‘also partly derived from’ hybrid forms, such as mock documentaries, fictional and factual aspects are even harder to distinguish (Roscoe & Hight, 2001, p. 40). Indeed, ‘Hybridity has always characterised factual filmmaking’s refashioning of older forms for the modern television market and the boundaries between fact and fiction have never been clear-cut’ (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 23). This point highlights that fiction and fact exist on a continuum, and programmes draw on them in different ways. How they do this depends on genre: documentary and soap opera, for instance, have different ways of mixing the factual and fictional and constructing reality.

Within the genre of wildlife documentary reality is constructed in such a way as to provide an insight into animals in their natural habitat. Indeed,

In nature documentary, with its history of association with the biological sciences and tradition of apparently “recording” unmediated behaviour, residual truth claims have persisted (Bagust, 2008, p. 217).

The truth claims of wildlife documentary are also related to understandings of the biological sciences, in a way which is not the case for many other forms of documentary, and has implications for the way ‘truth’ is assessed. Moreover, wildlife documentary is often perceived as factual television but, as I discussed in Chapter 2:

[T]his is not to suggest that it is a form that fully escapes debates about fakery and truthfulness; it is instead to note that the social position that such programming continues to occupy is one that can be aligned with the truth-telling, observational, educational priorities which television has often placed on its factual output (Mills, 2017, p. 83).

Indeed, Hill (2005) comments that documentaries are more likely to be trusted and believed as real than docu-soaps. She argues that the more entertainment focused a programme is, the less trust-worthy it is perceived as by audiences thus, ‘.... the more entertaining a factual programme is, the less real it appears to viewers’ (p. 57). Wildlife documentary broadcasters such as the BBC claim the status of wildlife documentaries to be educational and scientific which might lead audiences to believe that the representations of animals are ‘real’. Mills (2017) observes that ‘documentary claims to have a relationship to the truth may be more powerful to the representations of animals because many viewers will have little or no other resources to draw on to assess those truth-telling claims’ (p. 81). Crowther and Leith (1995), in the same vein, point out that stories in science documentaries are presented as scientific and authoritative with evidence of filmed animals, and as viewers generally lack the knowledge to argue otherwise, wildlife documentary does not give much space for alternative reading or negotiation of the story. They suggest that,

while it is possible to adopt a ‘resistant’ reading position - if, for instance, we are mistrustful of the genre or other dominant discourses in society – the firm authority of the address in a science documentary (and the absence of specialist knowledge to debate the ‘facts’) militates against negotiating or rejecting the position constructed for us by the texts, making it hard to develop alternative readings (p. 46).

Furthermore, ‘there is no window for reflecting on whose truth, and whose story, we are being told’ (p. 48). This notwithstanding, viewers actively engage with the stories presented and accept/reject/negotiate the meanings in wildlife documentaries; this is discussed further below.

Wildlife documentaries may also create a sense of unmediated reality because animals are not acting. In fact, when there is less evidence of acting, viewers seem to accept representations as real, such as when surveillance footage is used in reality TV shows. Surveillance footage is perceived as trustworthy, having evidential power and capturing real events (Hill, 2005). Indeed, Hobson's (2004) study of reality TV found that viewers were not aware of editing and believed the programme to be a representation of people's "real" lives. Viewers seem to assume that when people are aware that they are being filmed, they may act or behave unnaturally while, if they are not aware of the camera, their behaviours are natural. Ward (2006), however, argues that this is not an issue and points out that, in the case of documentary, people do act differently in front of the camera and that this is natural. He argues that critics and filmmakers should accept performativity in front of the camera and the naturalness of such action. Though, ITC/BSC research (2003) found that people believe wildlife documentaries to be real and trustworthy as they assume that animals behave naturally rather than acting. Although people are aware that representations of reality on TV are subject to careful selection, editing, and manipulation, and '...despite popular scepticism about the representation of reality evident in debates about fakery in factual programming there has not been a wide-scale rejection of realist modes of representation by audiences' (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 34).

Having discussed the different genres that lie behind wildlife docu-soaps, and the ways that they construct their realities, I now turn my attention to wildlife docu-soaps, arguing that they can best be understood as a hybrid genre.

3.4: Wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre

In this section I explore wildlife docu-soap as a hybrid genre which shares conventions with and has similarities to other TV genres. Drawing on different genres to produce hybrid programmes is a strategy commonly used by wildlife programme makers (Cottle, 2004) in order to diversify and attract audiences. In the case of wildlife docu-soaps, this strategy involved changing to a more entertainment focused, light-weight programming with a "broader appeal" (Kilborn, 2006). Indeed, documentaries have many features in common with entertainment genres (Bousé, 1998; Hill, 2008). Thus wildlife docu-soaps were created by TV makers as a strategy to attract viewers in an increasingly competitive

global market. This change in the industry influenced not only wildlife documentary but other genres too, such as reality TV; this highlights that competition and hybridization are the norm within the television industry.

As I have already suggested, wildlife docu-soaps draw on different genres, including soap opera, reality TV, docu-soap and wildlife documentary, and are sometimes referred to as hybrid programmes (Bagust, 2008). They share features with the format of docu-soaps but use animals as central characters; they also share certain characteristics with soap opera, such as dramatic storylines featuring unique individuals who happen to be animals. They are character driven like docu-soap and soap opera but are more entertainment focused than factual entertainment such as docu-soap and reality TV. The use of multiple characters is similar to soap opera and reality TV, and the emphasis on dramatic events resembles docu-soap, soap opera and many reality TV shows. Dramatic events are also part of the conventions of wildlife documentary. Bousé (1998) explains,

this [blue chip wildlife films] can entail the classic, animal protagonist centered narrative, or some version of the "family romance," or even a narrative centering on the film maker's encounter with the animals, but in any case usually includes some dramatic chases and escapes (p. 134).

Wildlife docu-soaps often have home as a setting, either focusing on a particular family or community; home means not simply a geographical location or living space but a place where family life and dramas take place. Like soap opera, the dramatic aspects of wildlife docu-soap are often rooted in personal matters such as finding a mate, and, like reality TV, they represent animal behaviour as spontaneous, unmediated and intimate. While wildlife documentary focuses on similar issues, wildlife docu-soaps incorporate them into a narrative that continues from episode to episode, season to season, following the dramatic stories of particular individuals. A distinctive feature of wildlife docu-soaps is that, like soap opera, they incorporate open-ended, continuous storylines. This is not usual for wildlife documentaries which Crowther (1999) suggests use masculine texts - 'end-orientated, linear and cohesive' (p. 51). Elements of all these genres are incorporated into wildlife docu-soaps, and recognizing their characteristics allow us to understand wildlife docu-soap as a hybrid genre.

An example of a wildlife docu-soap is the TV series *Meerkat Manor* which was based on the lives of several groups of meerkat. The programme focuses on the dramatic aspects of the meerkats' lives such as 'illicit pregnancies, wayward children, and neighbourhood rivalries [which] resonate with themes in typical television dramas' and produce 'some great soap opera' (Milius, 2007, p. 138). As with other TV programmes, narrative is central to wildlife docu-soap. Furthermore, the way narratives are constructed in wildlife docu-soap is closely related to its status as hybrid genre.

3.4.1: Narrative

Narrative is an important concept for the hybrid genre of wildlife docu-soap because it highlights the structural similarities of narratives in wildlife docu-soaps and a range of other TV genres. It is made up of events that are selected to make a story, characters, how a story moves, and whether it is linear or not (Porter, Larson, Harthcock & Nellis, 2002). Narratives may categorize animals in certain ways, such as predators or mothers, and this may affect how animals are represented and perceived. Indeed, Sealey and Charles (2013) find a connection between the categorization of animals and people's perceptions of them. A narrative can individualise and present animals as active agents with similarities to humans or emphasise differences between them (Gilquin & Jacobs, 2006). Gupta (2006) found this in her investigation of hunters' narratives of fox-hunting with foxes being individualised and presented as active agents while horses are rarely personified; this reflects hunters' emotional involvement with foxes and their perception of horses as mere transport. Gilquin and Jacobs (2006) comment on the use of the pronoun 'who' when referring to animals which, they argue, "neutralizes" the difference in humanity between the human and the nonhuman animal' (p. 96). Though they point out that the use of 'who' is not always positive, they conclude that it indicates closeness to animals and presents animals in a more equal light. This suggests that how narrative refers to animals may influence people's perceptions of them, particularly their similarities to or differences from, humans.

The narrator is the person who tells the story, and features in a variety of TV programmes including wildlife documentaries, docu-soaps and reality TV. Narration is important in

animal centred programmes because it conveys meaning. Many wildlife documentaries fall into a category of 'expository mode of documentary' (Nichols, 1991, p. 34) which includes wildlife docu-soaps. Nichols explains that the dominant feature of this category is the use of voice-over narrative. Although Bruzzi (2006) is critical of this characterisation, Nichols explains that it refers to the use of an informative narration and invites audiences to see a direct connection between narration and images. Mills (2015) comments,

while the promotional material for Planet Earth might foreground that it was shot 'entirely in high definition' and featured 'incredible footage of creatures never before seen on television', it is the voiceover which explains this material to the viewer and therefore legitimizes the arguments for which the imagery is offered as evidence (p. 105).

In this way the meanings of images are delivered through the narration and leads audiences towards particular interpretations. Bruzzi (2006), however, argues that,

the overriding view is that the documentary voice-over is the filmmakers' ultimate tool for telling people what to think. This gross over-simplification covers a multitude of differences, from the most common use of commentary as an economic device able to efficiently relay information that might otherwise not be available or might take too long to tell in images, to its deployment as an ironic and polemical tool (p. 50).

She also points out that some voice over documentaries enable audiences to challenge dominant perceptions of documentary as didactic and allow them a wide variety of responses and thoughts. Bruzzi further argues that even most conventional of documentaries do not stop people interpreting the programme for themselves. This points to the idea of active audiences which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In wildlife docu-soaps, narrators not only tell a story about animals but also connect audiences with the animals' worlds, explaining what is going on and how we can interpret the animals' behaviours. In fact, Hill (2005) claims that narration is key to telling a story because animals are unable to tell their own stories. It is through narration that wildlife

docu-soaps lead audiences to see personalities and emotions in animal characters (DeMello, 2012). Narrators tell a story about the animal characters which enables audiences to experience vicariously what is going on in the animals' world; but the extent to which these narratives tell a story of humans rather than animals remains a question which will be further discussed below.

Wildlife documentary has particular narrative conventions. In the previous chapter I discussed the way that wildlife documentary as a genre has been changing, but there are some aspects of the genre that are recognized as conventions persisting over time. Bousé (1998) argues that wildlife documentary has developed its own unique code and conventions, tending to focus on spectacle or entertainment as discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, Cabeza San Deogracias and Mateos-Pérez's (2013) analysis of wildlife documentary found that most scenes contained hunting and killing, especially killing of mammals as opposed to plants and insects. They reason that such a focus was because the stillness of animals is assumed to be boring to audiences. In another analysis, Crowther (1999) found that narratives often tell a particular story of gender and sexuality, portraying males as active agents while describing females as passive. Furthermore, males are often described as aggressive and competitive while females are associated with motherhood and caring; these are gender stereotypes as discussed earlier. Others point out that narratives often convey normative views of gender (Crowther & Leith, 1995) and hetero-normativity (Mills, 2013). Moreover, Bousé (1998) argues that the conventional narrative framework of wildlife film was created by Disney: 'This included the use of dramatic and comic plots often reflecting familiar mythic patterns deeply ingrained in Western cultural traditions' and 'also important was the addition of engaging characters' (p. 130). Disney's format of 'the cycle of animal protagonist films accompanied by warm, genial narration' (p. 132) became a 'classical format' of wildlife films. This type of narrative is also evident in wildlife docu-soaps though it is augmented by elements of the narrative structure of other TV genres such as soap opera and reality TV.

The platforms differ in the type of community they facilitate and the sorts of exchanges that characterise them. For example, responses from IMDb contain no interactions as IMDb only allows viewers to post reviews which are often longer than comments on TV.com and YouTube, both of which enable audience interaction. The type of interaction on these two platforms differs. On TV.com there is a high level of interaction between the posters who ask each other questions such as 'where do you live' or 'which character do

you like’. This interaction and posters’ attachment to the programmes enables a close community to develop. Moreover, the interactions on TV.com are usually friendly and there are no offensive or violent exchanges. In addition, participants have to actively search for the page by typing ‘TV.com Meerkat Manor’ on a search engine or typing ‘Orangutan Island’ on the in-website search function. This narrows down who engages in the TV.com communities to those who have a prior interest in the programmes. In contrast, on YouTube, as I showed in Chapter 7, there are aggressive and critical interactions. This may be because people can come across MM or OI related videos by accident (such as recommended videos shown on the side of the page when you play any video), so random people who are not fans of the programmes may post comments. Also, YouTube comments focus more on emotional responses to the programmes and the animal characters, with exchanges such as ‘I like Cha Cha’ followed by ‘me too’, and, as I have shown, expressions of emotion on YouTube are often excessive and written in a distinctive style. These differences between interactions in the online communities show that interactions are shaped by the structures and practices of the different platforms which, in turn, shape audience responses.

3.4.2: Animal characters

In this section I briefly discuss animal characters. As we have seen, strong characterisation is common in docu-soaps along with characters having their own story-line and biography. As Kilborn, Hibberd and Boyle (2001) comment, wildlife docu-soaps,

rely primarily for their appeal on the performance of individual characters with whom members of the audience are encouraged to identify, just as with characters in a fictional soap (p. 383).

The individualisation of the animals is another key aspect of wildlife docu-soaps. Each character is given an individual name and personality as well as a personal biography developed through the story-line. This process transforms individual animals into characters which are part of a story. This influences audiences’ responses to animals on TV. Indeed, the emotional reactions of viewers to animal characters in Meerkat Manor were recorded by Candea (2010):

...some fans, distraught at the death of particular meerkat characters, posted angry comments on the web, and some sent e-mails to the researchers, criticizing them for not intervening to save the animals in question Some of them blamed the program for giving what they felt was a distorted and overly romanticized image of the animals (p. 242).

Moreover, wildlife docu-soaps typically have multiple characters with different personalities. Like soap opera and reality TV, wildlife docu-soaps tend not to focus on one specific protagonist which means that viewers can choose the character/s they identify with. Similarly, having core characters who the audiences can identify with is an important feature of docu-soaps (Kilborn, Hibberd & Boyle, 2001). These features may facilitate the identification pattern which is found among viewers of reality TV and soap opera, as discussed above, and, as Brunsdon (2000) discusses, the representation of female characters with different social positions and functions may facilitate female viewers' identification.

3.4.3: Human-interest story

Human-interest story is one of the concepts which is important for my analysis of audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. The concept is useful for my research despite wildlife docu-soaps involving non-human characters; this is discussed more fully in Chapter 6 (see: page 150) where I explore the applicability of the concept to stories which are not based on human characters. Here I discuss the main features of human-interest stories. A human-interest story holds the interest of an audience and 'brings an individual's story or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem' (Valkenburg et al., 1999, p. 551). Human-interest stories often focus on individual, emotional and dramatic stories and are often used in news media. The concept points to a way of structuring a story, focusing on individual characters and their emotional engagements with events and each other. This structure is often found in animal-related stories and the concept is therefore useful for analysing wildlife docu-soaps. Human-interest stories elicit emotional responses in viewers: Cho and Gower (2006) found that they elicit sympathy while Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) concluded that audiences relate to characters through the emotional and

personal aspects of the story. Human-interest stories, therefore, facilitate emotional connections with and sympathy towards animal characters. Indeed, since the 1970s, the individualisation of animals and a focus on their intimate lives in the narratives of wildlife documentaries has become more popular (Chris, 2006). This use of narrative, as Mills (2015) claims, is essential for effectively mobilising emotions. In fact, Scott (2010) notes that the use of human-interest stories in nature documentaries ‘encourages viewers to empathise with the central characters [...] the audience is drawn into a world where the scientific discourse of past natural history series is disregarded in favour of a more human-interest angle’ (p. 34).

Human-interest stories are often found in children’s literature where animals are central characters (Fudge, 2002) and are also evident in wildlife docu-soaps.

DeMello (2012), for instance, comments that in *Meerkat Manor*: ‘viewers were able to watch the romantic entanglements, fights, friendships, and even “gang wars” of animals whose behaviour – as it is translated to us through the narration - seems awfully humanlike’ (p. 335). She is pointing to the way human-interest stories enable viewers to relate to the animal characters. This point is also made by Molloy (2011) in relation to animals in the news where human-interest, ‘soft’ stories are used because of their emotional appeal. She makes the point that animals ‘are ... easily constructed as characters in dramas, conflicts and romance’ (p. 7). It should be noted that animals can be constructed as dangerous, as in a film like *Jaws*, and that such negative representations may have deleterious consequences for the animals concerned (Silk et al., 2017).

Indeed, animal representations often promote certain ideas and convey messages, in other words they work ideologically and, as Fluton et al (2006) comment, this bears a relation to genre. For instance, marketing campaigns attempting to influence audiences often use animal representations thereby associating products with animals’ symbolic and cultural meanings (Lancendorfer et al., 2008). Thus, owls are used as a symbol of wisdom in many cultures, and images of them are used to promote products related to studying or researching; an example is the owl character on the language learning website/app Duolingo. In television media, Mills (2017) comments on the anthropomorphic representations of animals in *Peppa Pig* and how they work ideologically; *Peppa Pig* ‘teaches children how to be a particular kind of human, even if it uses non-human representations to this end’ (p. 71). Such use of animals has a long history and

demonstrates that animal representations are used to promote certain values in society. In these representations both the appearance of animals and their animal-like qualities are ignored; animals are customised to social, cultural and economic needs (Brown, 2010). Animal representations are manipulated to fit into human needs and ideologies in order to convey messages. Indeed, Crowther and Leith (1995) and Crowther (1999) comment on how stories in wildlife documentaries convey human ideologies – they normalize certain human behaviours and reinforce norms through anthropomorphic representations of animals, gender normativity is an example of this. In other words, animal representations serve particular purposes for human-interests which points to the way animal representations in docu-soaps tell stories about animals and, at the same time, convey ideological messages.

Human-interest stories attribute personalities and feelings to the animal characters and are dramatic and sensational thereby holding the audiences' attention. Audiences identify with individual animal characters due to their personality and the dramatic life events they experience which are given meaning by a narrator. This raises a question as to whether empathetic responses from viewers are due to an increase in empathetic attitudes towards animals, as argued by Franklin (1999), or an effect of the narrative; this is something I explore in my data analysis. It also points to the part played by anthropomorphism in the way animals are represented and stories are told.

3.4.4: Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a feature of wildlife documentary as a genre and wildlife docu-soaps are no exception. It can be defined in various ways but is commonly understood as the attribution of solely human-like characteristics to non-human agents including animals (Crist, 2000). Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo (2007) comment that anthropomorphism can be used to describe observable and non-observable characteristics such as behaviours and emotional states. It has been argued that the use of anthropomorphism is inevitable when describing animal behaviours (Elliot, 2001) and Serpell (2002) suggests that it is essential to the formation of relationships with animals. Wildlife documentaries commonly employ anthropomorphism which denotes the attribution of human emotions and motivation to animal behaviour. An example of this is when, 'We see two mammals bumping each other or making loud noises, but what we report is often not a simple description, but a

conclusion: the animals are exhibiting “aggression”, or perhaps “competition” (Evernden 1992, p. 53). This language attributes meaning to what animals are doing, and while some might argue that this is illegitimate because of its anthropomorphism, others argue that it is as valid a way of understanding animal behaviour as any other (Crist, 2000). In this thesis I follow Crist in understanding anthropomorphism as the use of ‘ordinary language’ to talk about animals. She defines ordinary language as “the everyday language of human affairs” (p.2) as opposed to the technical or scientific language that is often used to describe animal life. The use of ordinary language has the effect of animals emerging as subjects and their lives being meaningful and is, as I will show, the way they are represented in wildlife docu-soaps.

As I mentioned in the previous section, anthropomorphism can be used to turn animals into characters which teach human values and morals. DeMello (2012) explains that animals are often used as human models with human-like characteristics in children’s literature to teach children moral and ethical issues. She gives the example of *The Three Little Pigs* and points out that the story expresses human messages and ideologies through animal characters. Although it is not clear if such a claim is applicable to the representations of animals in wildlife docu-soaps, DeMello argues that the animal characters are essentially humans in animal disguise, carrying so called human qualities and teaching audiences moral values. Baker (2000) asks ‘why is it that our ideas of the animal – perhaps more than any other set of ideas – are the ones which enable us to frame and express ideas about human identity?’ (p. 6). He is pointing to the way animals are used to convey ideas and values about human identity. This raises an interesting point in relation to wildlife docu-soaps where the animals are both ‘real’, they are actual living animals, and narrativised in order to tell a story and communicate certain ideas. The use of anthropomorphism is common in many forms of media including children’s stories mentioned earlier and, in a similar way, wildlife docu-soaps combine anthropomorphism with animal characters and narratives.

Anthropomorphism has a range of effects with some arguing that it can generate negative attitudes towards animals if they are represented as morally evil (Pierson, 2005); it can also be used for the financial benefit of the TV industry and the exploitation of animals (Horak, 2006). However, the positive effects of anthropomorphism on human perceptions of wildlife and non-human animals have been widely documented. For example, anthropomorphism can promote wildlife conservation by promoting empathy towards

wildlife species (Chan, 2012). Moreover, it leads people to understand that animals have conscious experiences and should therefore be treated as moral agents (Gray, Gray & Wegner, 2007). Indeed, 'Anthropomorphizing nature allows it to be moralized' (Gebhard, Nevers & Billmann-Mahecha, 2003, p. 97-98). Such arguments highlight the possibility of anthropomorphism enabling people to relate to wild animals with empathy which could have positive consequences. Gebhard, Nevers, and Billmann-Mahecha (2003) argue, for instance, that empathy towards nature increases moral concern for environmental problems, while Milton (2002) points out that wildlife docu-soaps encourage people to appreciate and be aware of animals' feelings. She also points out that wildlife docu-soaps explain animal behaviours in a way which encourages people to appreciate the personhood of animals. This is apparent in the narrative which focuses on animal characters with various roles and personalities, their dramatic, and often human-like, life events and their families. In this way, anthropomorphising animal characters may connect animal and human lives and elicit an awareness of personhood in non-human animals.

In this section I have discussed the distinctive features of wildlife docu-soaps, animal characters, narratives and anthropomorphism, and shown how they work together to create the genre of wildlife docu-soap. I have also argued that wildlife docu-soap is a hybrid genre sharing elements with other genres while retaining the form of wildlife documentary. In the next section I turn my attention to television audiences.

3.5: Audiences

As my study focuses on audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps online it is important to consider how audiences engage with TV programmes. In this part of the chapter I turn my attention to the idea of active audiences and their engagement with media products. I conceptualise viewers as active agents who seek out the media products they want; moreover some viewers not only watch TV programmes, but critically analyse and discuss them with others. Such practices are evident amongst radio and television audiences, such as soap opera viewers, who discuss the content of programmes with family members and friends. Moreover, the messages and content of television can be interpreted in various ways by audiences.

My study focuses on audience responses online where audience activities have become increasingly visible (Livingstone, 2004). This has been facilitated by the development and spread of new media technology and the rise of audiences who actively and visibly use online platforms (Andrejevic, 2008; Livingstone, 2004; Bielby, Harrington & Bielby, 1999). While it is only a sub-section of viewers who engage with programmes online (Baym, 2010), those that do provide a fruitful site to investigate a range of audience responses to media products. Andrejevic (2008) illustrates this with an example of online fan sites where audience members can exchange opinions about programmes and give producers feedback. Moreover, such activities are visible to outsiders through these online websites. Indeed,

the advent of new interactive technological platforms like the internet did not create the active audience, but has made these practices visible and vital in ways that reconfigure audiences' role in media culture (Meyers, 2012, p. 1023).

Such visibility has also altered how audiences respond to content and interact with producers and made more visible the range of audience responses. Furthermore, it has also led programme makers to take more notice of audience response (Bird, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Falero, 2016) thereby changing the landscape of television viewing.

Not only are audiences active but their reasons for consuming TV programmes are varied. Bignell (2012) comments that:

Television Studies theorists regard the television audience not as a relatively uniform mass but instead as a complex set of overlapping groups with different allegiances, backgrounds and interests (p. 256).

Audiences also differ on their motives for consuming media products (Lee, 2013). Because of this, they may understand messages in TV programmes differently.

Some scholars, like Scott (2010), argue that the established conventions and codes of nature TV programmes limit the possible interpretation of meanings and that audiences'

responses are shaped by the text, for instance, through the narrative and music. Others, however, suggest that these do not determine how audiences react as they negotiate meanings for themselves. This means that they are,

regarded not as passive consumers of meanings but as negotiating meanings for themselves that are often resistant to those meanings that are intended or that are discovered by close analysis (Bignell, 2012, p. 30).

The opportunities for active engagement vary with genre and programme. An example of resistant readings of media texts is shown by Brown (1994) who found that viewers used various tactics and strategies to accept/reject/negotiate soap opera texts and did not necessarily accept the meanings offered by a programme. This depended on viewers' own ideology and their social, cultural and ethnic positions. This shows audiences' complex and sophisticated readings of media texts and their critical engagement with messages which leads them to negotiate the meanings presented by programmes.

In addition, audiences' critical and active engagement with media texts is profoundly social. This is pointed out by Hill (2005):

...when people watch reality programmes they talk about what they are seeing with other people at home, at work, at school. Popular factual television facilitates intercommunication. It sparks debate (p. 191).

A similar phenomenon is found amongst soap opera audiences. Brow argues that talking is a key component of pleasure for soap opera viewers, and that they give women a space to discuss and voice their opinions (Brown, 1994). These arguments point to the fact that, while watching TV shows may be a solitary activity, responding to them is often collective (Gorton, 2009). Especially in the era when many people have access to the internet and online communities, people do not need to find others who watch the same programmes in the same geographical area, but can find them easily online where they can communicate about their favourite programmes. The next section focuses on these online communities.

3.6: Online communities

The concept of online community is important in understanding how audiences respond to programmes. An online community is defined as ‘groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism’ (Ridings et al., 2002, p. 273).

Membership of these communities is open to anyone participating online regardless of the frequency or degree of engagement with the community (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Baym (2010) identifies 5 qualities of online communities: space; practice; shared resources and support; shared identities; and interpersonal relationships. Space means a shared metaphorical place and Baym points out that online environments are often referred to as a ‘space’ where people can go and participate. Practice refers to shared practices within a community ranging from ways of speaking/writing, such as specific acronyms used, norms like a shared sense of appropriate communication (with inappropriate behaviours being criticized by others), and a definition of skilled practices. Shared resources and support include various supportive behaviours members such as emotional support, informational support and esteem support. Shared identities include a shared sense of ‘us’. Baym’s five qualities are helpful both to define online community, and to make the similarities visible between off-line and online communities. For instance, the concept of space where people meet resembles off-line, face-to-face, place-based communities.

A sense of shared identity can be formed through mutual interests. Indeed, online communities are primarily formed through online interaction about mutual interests (Dennis, Poothari & Natarajan, 1998; Kozinets, 1999) as the internet enables like-minded people to be connected regardless of their location (McKenna et al., 2002). Online audiences can talk about TV programmes, characters they like, and programme plots and can speculate about what is going to happen next with others who are as enthusiastic as they are and who identify themselves as “fans”. Jenkins (2006) claims that,

one becomes a “fan” not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a “community” of other fans who share common interests (p. 41).

There is a debate about how to define fan which I discuss in the next section. Jenkins's statement, however, points to the strong connection between online communities and fan culture, a discussion of which I now turn to.

3.7: Fans and fan communities

As I showed in the previous section, fans are those who engage with programme- related activities other than simply watching TV programmes. They may join an online community where they can engage in discussions with others; such activities, crucially for my research, make their interactions visible to outsiders. Thus, this section will focus on how fans are defined and how they engage with TV programmes through online communities

The category 'fan' has been the subject of much discussion. Falero (2016) asks, how do we define fans who reject the term fan? How do we categorize those who are not fans but are part of a fan community? How do we categorize self-claimed fans who do not take part in any fan activities? Scholars define fans in different ways ranging from emotional consumption (Sandvoss, 2005) to identification with media products (Bignell, 2012), having a 'keener and more active interest' (Siapera, 2004, p. 162), and the creation of original products which are shared with others (Gwenllian-Jones, 2002). However, for my research, I use Jenkins's (2006) definition of fans as people participating in a community by sharing emotions and opinions about programmes. This definition is relevant for my research as I investigate online communities where people express their thoughts and emotions about wildlife docu-soaps. Participation in activities other than simply watching a programme is a core aspect of being a fan (Brojakowski, 2015). Fans not only consume, identify with or produce things such as fan novels, but they talk to each other about programmes. Indeed,

to "view" television is a relatively private behaviour. To be a "fan," however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflect an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative (Bielby, Harrington & Bielby, 1999, p. 35).

The ‘excessive’ range of activities in which they engage is revealed in the following comment:

Fans combine conspicuous, enthusiastic, consumption of official texts and spin-offs with their own creative and interpretive practices. Fans are viewers who do not merely watch films or television programmes but also write fan fiction and cultural criticism, produce fan art, scratch videos, websites and so on, and who seek out other fans with whom to share their enthusiasm [.....] Fans are distanced from ‘ordinary’ consumers because their modes of consumption are considered excessive (Gwenllian-Jones, 2002, p. 172).

Thus fans do not simply watch programmes but participate in a range of activities which make them a specific type of audience.

It is also argued that emotional involvement in a community is an essential part of fandom. For instance, Ito’s (2017) analysis of Japanese anime [Japanese animated media] shows that fan community members are motivated by a desire to contribute to the community where they learn skills, experience self-actualization and a sense of belonging, and establish a reputation. Such motivation highlights an emotional involvement where people are committed to sustaining and contributing to a community with no financial benefit. Ito’s work highlights how emotion is a core aspect of fan communities and emphasises that fan communities are linked to affinities rather than geographical locational ties (Jenkins, 2006). Fans also develop emotional connections to particular media products which leads them to defend the product and talk about its quality (Ross, 2008; Bird, 2003). Indeed, ‘individuals have an underlying need for an emotional bond with high-involvement products that they buy. Brand development and relationship development are complementary and substitutable strategies towards this bonding’ (Fournier, 1998, p. 345), and such emotional bonds have been observed with media products, such as Star Wars (Brown et al., 2003). Fan community is therefore based on fans’ emotional involvement with media products including sharing interests and passions with other fans; Jenkins (2006) identifies this as a key aspect of fans.

Fan activities online, such as critical discussions and sharing practices, meanings and their interactions with texts (Lindlof, 1988; Costello & Moore, 2007), are cultural and social practices that have evolved from already established practices (Ford, 2008). Thus, the circulation of fan created content and videos existed prior to the arrival of the internet. For instance, soap opera fans used to circulate video tapes (Brown 1994). The rise of the internet, however, has made it easier and faster to circulate media products amongst a wider audience. Creating things such as fan videos and novels is also made easier by the internet because 'technological evolution brings the film to digital video allowing the same art to be created and consumed on a computer' (Cayari, 2011, p. 4). Thus technological developments have allowed people to enjoy and generate videos from their own devices and given rise to YouTubers (Richard, 2008) and people who create their own content (Bechman & Lomborg, 2013; Bruns, 2008). Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) claim that there has been a shift in media distribution, from big companies and producers selling their products to consumers, to circulation by consumers. This involves,

people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. And they are doing so not as isolated individuals but within larger communities and networks, which allow them to spread content well beyond their immediate geographic proximity (p. 2).

Indeed, the size and scale of communication within fan communities has been transformed by the internet. Falero (2016) comments that the online environment has not only transferred fan activities online but transformed them because fans can communicate regardless of location if they have access to the internet.

People who would perhaps never have joined a fan club in an offline capacity were participating in fan club rituals online, writing fan fiction, discussing their favorite television shows, and posting fan art on their websites (p. 11).

This has been achieved through the internet with its increased speed of communication, immediacy of expression, expansion of community without geographical limits, and rapid circulation of information; there are, however, country-specific regulations and censorship

that may limit forms of communication. Moreover fans and their activities are more widespread than before the arrival of the internet when fan activities were circulated through mail or fan magazines which were shared only within a small community (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013). Jenkins (2006) agrees that the internet has had a positive impact on fan communities, but he also points out that there may be too many strangers in a community and that this may lead to fans feeling alienated. Also, the sheer number of people involved means that the very definition of fandom may not be shared among community members, especially between long-term fans and new fans, and that there may be difficulties establishing ethical standards and clear mutual goals within a community.

Additionally, it should be noted that fans are not only supporters of media products but also harsh critics. Negative criticisms from fans are sometimes labelled as “trolling”, but Falero (2016) points out that this label,

dismisses real critique, and reinforces the notion that everyday people are not equipped for critical discussion about the media they consume (p. 10).

Gray (2003) calls those who critically evaluate media products as “anti-fans”. According to him, trolls make offensive and aggressive posts in order to engage with others and receive emotional responses, but anti-fans do not simply enjoy hating and criticizing shows, they also want to make TV better. For instance, fans’ harsh criticism of the live action version of *Avatar: The last Airbender* (Lopez, 2012; Gatson & Reid, 2012) arose because they believed that their grass-roots activism was maintaining the integrity of the original series which was imperilled by the live action version (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). This reflects the complexity of fandom and highlights the way that fans’ emotional involvement results not only in acceptance and admiration of media products but also in criticism.

Although, this section has emphasized the visibility of online fandom and the activities of fans, it should be noted that most online community members may not be visible to others. For instance, Baym (2010) comments that the most common role in an online community is a “lurker”, who does not contribute to a community but read posts and comments. Although, as Baym notes, many lurkers are considered as community members by other more active members in a community, their presence is not visible. This suggests that the

population studied in research on online communities may not be representative of the whole online community because research tends to focus on that fraction of online community members who actively participate in a community.

One of the things that fans discuss in online communities is their feelings about programmes, and I now turn to a discussion of concepts that have been deployed to understand emotional connections between audiences and media products.

3.8: Para-social interaction, emotional involvement and identification

Para-social interaction and identification have been identified as ways of understanding audiences' emotional responses to media products, and they are important to my analysis of audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. A para-social interaction refers to a relationship formed between a media viewer and a media persona, in other words between viewers and those whom they watch on television (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schramm & Harmann, 2008). In the 1950s, Horton and Wohl (1956) observed that 'one of the most striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with the performer' (p. 215). This illusory 'face-to-face' relationship is conceptualised as para-social interaction which refers to 'the phenomenon that viewers form beliefs and attitudes about people they know only through television, regardless of whether such people are fictional characters or real people' (Schiappa et al., 2006, p. 20) or, indeed, animals.

In the 1970s it was argued that para-social interaction is encouraged by repeated and consistent viewing in a similar way to increased interactions leading to deeper intimacy between people involved in face-to-face interactions (Altman and Taylor, 1973), and Nordlund (1978) claimed that characters in TV programmes encourage audiences to interact with them through regular appearances. There is more recent evidence to support this argument; thus when a viewer connects with television characters the interaction is processed in the same way as face-to-face interactions (Kanazawa, 2002) and there is evidence that para-social relationships are analogous to face-to-face social relationships (Haigh & Wigley, 2015). Moreover, audiences' knowledge of and familiarity with the characters may also encourage emotional involvement and feelings of intimacy towards

them. For instance, Eyal and Rubin (2003) comment: ‘as we view a program, we become familiar with the persona by observing and interpreting the appearance, attitude, style, and behaviour of the performer’ (p. 81), and such familiarity may lead viewers to become emotionally involved with individual characters.

Para-social interactions impact on audience responses in various ways: they ‘mediate short- and long-term emotional responses to depicted events and to characters themselves’ (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991, p. 64), and the viewer-character relationship has an impact on audiences’ emotions and behaviours (Klimmt et al., 2006). Katz, Liebes, and Berko (1992) found that para-social interactions encourage audiences to relate media content to their own experiences. This evidence indicates that the concept of para-social interaction is important to understanding the emotional responses of audience members.

Related to para-social interaction, identification is when ‘an individual consciously or unconsciously recognizes him/herself in or wishes to be, another individual so that he/she becomes involved with that individual and vicariously participates in his/her activities, feelings, and thoughts’ (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975, p. 52). In other words, identification is ‘a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them’ (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). Similarly, identification involves audiences trying to understand characters and their emotional state through their own experiences (Sood, 2002) and emotional involvement tends to increase identification with characters (Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Indeed, Baym (2000) found that soap opera fans frequently post interpretive responses online and often those involve characters’ motivations. Identification is also found in audiences’ responses to reality TV (Briggs, 2010). This discussion demonstrates that audiences try to understand characters’ actions and inner states through their own life experiences and shows how this may encourage viewers to take a character’s perspective and vicariously experience their life events. There is also evidence that identification increases satisfaction with viewing experience (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Godlewski & Perse, 2010) as well as emotional involvement, positive emotions (Godlewski & Perse, 2010), and the satisfaction of watching a programme (Nabi et al., 2006).

Audiences identify not only with human characters but also with animals. Similarities of gender, nationality and social situation between media persona and an audience member are usually important factors for identification to occur (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975).

However, Miller (2010) claims that: '[z]oomorphic images deflect our focus away from age, gender and ethnicity, inviting us to see ourselves in them' (p. 79-80). This might explain why 'identification seems to occur when the animals in the mass media are (or are perceived to be) personified' (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975, p. 53). This notwithstanding, gender is a significant factor in animal representations: wildlife documentaries often focus on masculinity and reinforce patriarchy (Elliot, 2001) and endow female characters with motherly qualities (Crowther & Leith, 1995). This suggests that social factors are not always absent in wildlife programmes although their effect on audience identification has not, to my knowledge, been explored.

This section has focused on the concepts para-social interaction and identification, both of which are helpful in understanding audience responses to media characters.

3.9: Online communities

As well as being emotionally involved with media products, fans are also emotionally involved with the communities they belong to, and emotional support and a sense of belonging may be found within a community. In the previous section, we saw that emotional esteem and support and a sense of shared identity are traits of communities. Similarly, online communities provide emotional comfort and security, advice, positive feedback, and empathy (Baym, 2010), and a sense of belonging, intimacy and reassurance develops between members (Haythornthwaite, 1999). Although negative interactions can occur (Baym, 2010), there is an increasing recognition that online communities provide a space for intimate interactions. Indeed, forming friendships is a common reason for joining online communities (Horrigan et al., 2001), especially for adolescents (Gross et al., 2002). Thus, this section will focus on the emotional aspects of online communities which is a key concern in this thesis.

Online communities relating to television programmes are formed through members' shared interests.

The structure of the Internet, with its search capabilities and various virtual community forums, makes it easier to find others in similar situations and get emotional support, social support, a sense of belonging and companionship (Ridings & Gefen, 2004, p. 1).

It is therefore not surprising that people form relationships online. McKenna et al. (2002), for instance, comment that online communication promotes new relationships. Indeed,

online communities form when enough people carry on computer-mediated nonprivate discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to develop what are considered “social relationships” with other online participants (Brown et al., 2007, p. 3).

In Falero’s (2016) analysis of *Television Without Pity* [a website where people discuss TV programmes], she found that posters talk about their personal lives, and report that others offer help and support if they are in a difficult situation. Falero comments that ‘...the need to talk about life outside television and make personal connections was strong’ (p. 66) in the community. Falero also found that there are face-to-face regional meetings and conventions to develop further personal connections, and as a result people establish long-lasting friendships or even marry each other. In Baym’s (2010) study, she found members of online soap opera discussion groups perceived other group members as close friends. Hills (2002) calls the social bonds developed through television programme a ‘common affective tie’ (p. 180). In addition, being able to talk about their favourite shows could be related to a sense of self-esteem and reassurance, as being able to express oneself online is empowering, especially when a person receives positive feedback (Baym, 2010). Studies therefore highlight that social relationships are formed within television programme online communities.

Although offline and online communications are different, they both contain expressions of emotions. Baym (2010) observes playfulness and displays of emotions in online messages despite the lack of non-verbal cues. This lack often means that messages are considered

less immediate and intimate but people make up for this by using such things as emoticons and exclamation marks. Also, Falero (2016) points out that people write “gasp” or “rolls eyes” to indicate certain actions related to emotions, and an all capital letter sentence is regarded as “shouting”. So although online communications usually take the form of text, this does not preclude the expression of emotions.

3.10: Platforms and online communities

Online communities exist on different platforms and, in this section, I discuss the relationship between online communities and different platforms. Platforms have different functions with some facilitating interactions amongst users while others host user-generated reviews; they also have specific populations of fans and users (Napoli & Kosterich, 2017). Thus, Cassella (2015) points out that while Facebook is a ‘less is more’ medium, Twitter is used for instant feedback and engagement by media producers. Moreover, online platforms are shared spaces inhabited by various users, and this connects to the different practices of each website. Baym (2010) comments:

When there is no single shared environment, the metaphor of space quickly unravels. Community organized through multiple sites do not feel like places. Shared practices are less likely to develop when groups are spread throughout sites, especially since each site is embedded in contexts that bring them their own communicative traditions (p. 91).

In this sense, online communities are as varied as the platforms they engage with. They have different members, practices, norms and identities. Indeed, Hernandez (2015) highlights that reality TV audiences on different platforms engage with different topics, such as Tumblr being associated with positive discussions, while Facebook and Twitter focus more on criticism.

It is also worth considering the different kind of language people use on different websites. For instance, on reviewing sites, people may take more time to write and re-write their post before they publish online while on more synchronous platforms, such as Twitter, people

may just type a comment without much thought (Baym, 2010). Websites which include interactions between users may be associated with language which is more like the spoken word, while reviewing websites may be associated with a different kind of language which is less colloquial and more professional (Baym, 2010).

In addition, audience activities can differ depending on which country the user is located in. For instance, Moe, Poell and van Dijck (2016) point out that audience activities result from complex interactions within the media system, including technologies and structures within the industry, and that this varies with country. Lastly, and importantly for my thesis, the genre of media products may give rise to different audience activities and responses online. For example, Falero (2016) notes that reality TV online boards tend to contain ‘the most intensely passionate moments of dislike and antipathy’ (p. 108). She found that an online board for *Real World*, an American reality TV show, was filled with sexist insults, while on an online board on the same website for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, an American fictional TV series, such insults were called out as sexism.

In this section I have explored how online communities are used for various purposes such as social support and sharing thoughts about TV programmes and how they differ depending on the platform which hosts them. These differences, particularly in terms of the language used on different platforms, are important for understanding the responses of wildlife docu-soap audiences, as are media literacy and the way audiences use different sources of information. This is what I focus on in the next section.

3.11: Media literacy

An online community not only provides a space for affective interaction but also a space to practise media literacy, critical engagement with media products and online learning. Indeed, online communities may also have an impact on people’s understanding of programmes and wildlife, and media literacy is an important concept in this context. It could be argued that the development of media literacy is particularly important in light of the fact that wildlife docu-soap is a hybrid genre and the line between entertainment-focused TV programmes and factual and educational documentaries is blurred (Kilborn, 2006).

Livingstone (2004) defines media literacy as ‘the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms’ (p. 3). She comments that evaluation has become the most crucial skill for media literacy in recent years as the internet allows anyone to publish information, and people need to select and compare information sources based on quality, values and other aspects which may have an influence on the nature of messages. Also, media literacy is not only about a critical reading of information online but also the presentation of the self in an online space. Hull’s (2003) definition of media literacy highlights this aspect:

a familiarity with the full range of communicative tools, modes, and media, plus an awareness of and a sensitivity to the power and importance of representation of self and others, along with the space and support to communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively – these are paramount for literacy now (p. 230).

An online community environment can facilitate not only how to analyse and evaluate different sources of information but also to learn how to represent the self, interact with others, exchange information and encourage others to be critical.

Media literacy is increasingly important in the internet era when people are saturated with information. Livingstone comments that the amount of information online is enormous; as a consequence people need to learn how they can discriminate between a large pool of data sources that may or may not be accurate (Livingstone, 2004). In addition, there is no editorial control over much of the material on the internet.

Flanagan and Metzger (2000) comment:

Whereas newspapers, books, magazines, and television all undergo certain levels of factual verification, analysis of content, and editorial review, by and large Internet information is subject to no such scrutiny (p. 516).

This means that media literacy is vitally important for internet users. Moreover, since 2000 the internet has been the most commonly used method to obtain information, overtaking books and face to face communication in many Western countries (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Rennis et al., 2015), and the online environment has become a major medium shaping people's understanding of the world and social issues. Indeed,

There is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitising students and the public to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 370).

Kellner and Share could have added to this list the injustices faced by non-human animals. Media literacy can help sensitise audiences to issues concerning non-human animals as people's understanding of such issues are just as likely as others to be connected to media representations.

Critical analysis and judgement of information was part of television viewing before the arrival of the internet and can be seen as a form of media literacy (Hill, 2005). For example, Geraghty (1991) points out that soap opera audiences tactically used information from various sources in order to enjoy and predict what was going to happen in a story. Similarly, Hill (2005) claims that reality TV audiences respond critically to aspects of reality TV, such as the values and knowledge it presents. She also claims that this enables viewers to present themselves as intelligent individuals. Furthermore, by showing critical views, audiences distance themselves from a common perception of reality TV viewers as voyeuristic. Experience is also important to the development of critical viewing. Audiences of news media, for instance, relate programmes to their own experiences which influences their understanding of news stories (Gray, 2017).

Critical television viewing may be facilitated within a community where people can encourage and teach each other to be critical viewers. For instance, Falero (2016) found that her interviewees used the online community '... to hone their analytical skills in ways

they probably would not have by simply watching alone' (p. 62), and community members claimed that the community changed their perspectives on the programmes and the characters. Moreover, she also found that communities educated each other on how to analyse programmes. Jenkins (2006) refers to this as the 'collective intelligence' of a fan community; community members contribute different expertise, and by combining them, accomplish something that individuals could not do on their own. In online communities, people may share different sets of skills and knowledge, and through this the skills of critical viewing can be encouraged.

The idea of 'collective intelligence' is important and points to the way audience responses can be shaped by interactions within online communities. For instance, Baym (2010) observed exchanges of information in online soap opera fan communities which she relates to the fact that soap operas contain a large amount of information due to the high number of episodes and long running time. This makes it difficult for individuals to gather all the information available so a collective effort is needed to accumulate information about the programmes. Also Baym argues that it is not only the sharing of information that happens in online communities, but that online fan communities collect, keep and re-circulate information which contributes to enhancing everyone's viewing experiences. Information about programmes and characters contain little value to non-fans or non-viewers, but, for fans, information is valued because of their emotional involvement with the programme. Additionally, information about a programme may relate to one's status within a community. Jenkins (2006) comments that:

Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net, and so there is a compulsion to be the first to circulate new information and to be among the first to possess it (p. 125).

Exchanges of information, therefore, not only help with gathering information collectively but also relates to reputation within a community.

In addition, it is argued that discussing and exchanging information about programmes may lead to a collective understanding of programmes. For example, Jenkins (2006) noted a case of Twin Peaks fan communities where fans collaborated in the development of a 'kind of collective problem-solving' (p. 123). Baym (2000) argues that such collective understanding of soap opera is a 'kind of game':

If one understands soap viewing as a game of making meanings from clues, then the collaborative provision of multiple readings has obvious benefits. No longer limited by one's own time constraints and limited knowledge, the game becomes bigger and more fun to play. The more players the better (p. 93).

Such activities encourage viewers to share their interpretations and collectively understand programmes and, in this way, fans contribute different information and theories, which they critically analyse and compare. Jenkins (1992) comments:

Organised fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated and where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it (p. 86).

In this sense, organised fan communities themselves provide a space for audiences to critically evaluate and discuss TV programmes. This shows that there is a connection between fandom and media literacy in online communities where fans can share and display their knowledge and critically evaluate media products.

This section has discussed media literacy as it is an important theme in the analysis of my data. Media literacy is an increasingly important skill in an era when people receive information online which is not necessarily accurate. Television viewing has always been related to critical skills, and in an online community, viewers can teach each other to be critical and bring different skill sets together. Also, participation to social media sites, such as YouTube, may encourage users to practice media literacy through developing an

understanding of how technology and social sites work (Burgess & Green, 2009). Furthermore, participants in online communities can share information and opinions which may lead to collective understandings of TV programmes. Media literacy and the collective understanding of programmes are important concepts for this thesis. This chapter will conclude with outlining the analytical framework and key concepts that I use in the rest of my thesis.

3.12: Key Concepts

There are some key concepts that have emerged from my discussion in this and the previous chapter which are important for the analysis I present in my data chapters. In this section I highlight these concepts to remind the reader what they are and their relation to my thesis. As one of my concerns is the emotional response of audiences to wildlife docu-soaps and there is an argument, put forward by scholars such as Franklin (1999) and Bulliet (2005), that, with changes in human-animal relations in the second half of the 20th century, attitudes towards animals have become more empathetic, **empathy** is a key concept, and I use it to investigate audiences' emotional responses to representations of animals in wildlife docu-soaps.

I have argued that genre shapes how audiences read a text and that wildlife docu-soaps are hybrid genre; the idea of **hybrid genre** is therefore an important concept for my analysis. As I have discussed, wildlife docu-soaps share various features with other genres, such as soap opera, docu-soap, reality TV and wildlife documentaries, and this is connected both to how animals are represented and also to audience expectations of wildlife docu-soaps. As well as genre, audience response is shaped by a number of features of wildlife docu-soaps including individualisation and anthropomorphism.

Individualisation highlights the individuality of animal characters and may elicit empathetic responses. This way of representing animals is widely employed by wildlife docu-soaps and is likely to be significant for understanding audience responses. Indeed, one of my research questions concerns how audiences respond to such representations. Related to individualisation, **anthropomorphism** is also a key concept. Its use encourages audiences to appreciate the personhood of animals and I investigate the response of

audiences to animals represented in this way. Both individualisation and anthropomorphism are evident in the dramatic narratives and **human-interest stories** in wildlife docu-soaps. Human-interest story is important for my analysis of the way the narratives in wildlife docu-soaps are structured and how they hold the interest of audiences. Animal characters are key to such narratives and I argue that they are individualised and anthropomorphised. **Gender** and gender stereotypes relate to how animal characters are represented in the narratives and by the narrator. I have discussed the way that soap opera is gendered and that representations of animal characters may reproduce gender stereotypes and heteronormativity. In my analysis I explore the gender stereotyping evident in wildlife docu-soaps. Other social categories are also important in shaping representations of animals but I choose to focus on gender because of the association of wildlife docu-soaps with soap opera and the way the latter is gendered (Brunsdon, 2000).

In order to understand audience responses, I identify the concepts **para-social relationships** and **identification** as important. Wildlife docu-soaps present distinct individual characters through dramatic narratives which often involve personal dramas and such representations may be associated with viewers forming para-social relationships and identifying with animal characters. Furthermore, I will explore whether these concepts, which were developed for human-focused programmes, help us to understand audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps.

Wildlife docu-soaps are entertaining and educational and this, together with the relationship between the narrativised animal lives that they present to audiences, and animals' 'real' lives, are important to understanding **audience responses**. Audiences actively engage with wildlife docu-soaps, and this thesis highlights how they reproduce, resist, question and transform the material they are presented with. The online audiences of docu-soaps can be categorized as fans, who do not just watch programmes but engage with activities such as writing comments in online forums. In this way they are a part of an **online community** which provides a sense of belonging and emotional support for its members. The concept of online community denotes a space to discuss and express opinions about and responses to wildlife docu-soaps. This thesis will investigate the interactions that takes place in those communities, including the provision of emotional support and the sharing of information, as well as how they shape audience responses.

Media literacy is developed within online communities as they provide an opportunity for people to be critical of TV programmes and information available online. Also, interactions in online communities may generate a collective understanding of TV programmes. This thesis will investigate whether wildlife docu- soap audiences in online communities develop collective understandings of the programmes, stories and narratives.

3.14: Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored genre, the nature of TV audiences, and concepts used to understand audience responses in order to provide the context and analytical framework for my study. I began by explaining what genre is and discussing the genres on which wildlife docu-soap draws, arguing that wildlife docu-soaps are a hybrid genre sharing and mixing various elements from other genres such as reality TV, soap opera, docu-soap and wildlife documentary. I argued that emotional responses to characters in wildlife docu-soaps are elicited through the use of individualisation and anthropomorphism and that this mode of representation emphasises the similarities between animal characters and humans. As my main focus is on audience response to wildlife docu-soaps, I discussed how audiences actively engage with TV programmes and how audiences and online communities have developed from previously existing off-line practices. Wildlife docu-soap online audiences can be understood as fans who communicate in various forms and on different platforms; in this way they constitute online communities. Online communities allow people to find others who have similar interests, and to discuss and exchange information about specific TV programmes. They also allow people to develop a sense of belonging and form friendships and help them to achieve personal development by sharing skills and practising media literacy. I showed that online communities vary according to the different platforms which host them and that this can shape audience responses and the language used. In an era when information is over-saturated on the web, the skill to critically judge and compare information is essential, and audiences critically engage with television programmes through exchanging views. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the key concepts that emerged from this and the previous chapter. How these concepts can be applied to an analysis of wildlife docu-soaps will be the focus of Chapter 5 and in subsequent chapters I analyse audience responses. Before moving on to the application of these concepts, though, the next chapter will focus on methodology.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In the previous two chapters I explored existing research on wildlife docu-soaps, how they can be regarded as hybrid genre, and how wildlife documentaries have changed in line with changing social attitudes towards animals and changes in the television industry. I also explored audiences' responses to different genres and identified the concepts that have been developed to analyse them. My research interest is in how audiences respond to wildlife docu-soaps and, to my knowledge, there is little existing research on this topic. In order to explore this question, I chose to focus on audience responses to two wildlife docu-soaps, Meerkat Manor (MM) and Orangutan Island (OI), and, in this chapter, I will set out my research questions, and the methods I used to collect and analyse my data. I begin the chapter by introducing the research questions and how I selected the wildlife docu-soaps which are the focus of my research; I then discuss the research methods I used and explain why they were suitable to analyse online audience responses. I will describe how I accessed my data including which websites I used and how much data I collected from each platform. Following on from this, I will present some details of my analysis including code development, the qualitative analysis of audience responses and the textual analysis of the programmes. Finally, this chapter will discuss the ethical questions raised by researching online audience data and consider the limitations of my chosen methods.

4.1: Research questions

My research questions explore audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps and how they are shaped by the text themselves and by interaction within online communities. They are:

- 1) What are the responses of audiences to wildlife docu-soaps online?
 - i) How do audiences respond to narrative structure and characterization?
 - ii) How do audiences connect emotionally with animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps?
- 2) How are audience responses shaped by online communities?

- 3) How do different platforms affect the formation of online communities and through that, audience responses?

In order to explore these questions I chose to focus on two wildlife docu-soaps: Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island.

4.2: Selecting wildlife docu-soaps

In this section I introduce the two wildlife docu-soaps, and why I chose them as case studies. The previous chapters identified key characteristics of wildlife docu-soaps including individualised animal characters, dramatic story-line and the use of anthropomorphism, and MM and OI contain such characteristics. They also reflect the hybrid genre of wildlife docu-soap with both having similarities with soap opera and reality TV. Details of those two programmes including the characters, the plots and the production information will be found in the next chapter. Here I focus on why I chose them for my research.

The reasons I selected MM and OI for my research include their popularity and the size of their fan base. MM was chosen because the show is considered to be popular, it aired on Animal Planet (Candea, 2010; Clutton-Brock, 2010). As the show attracted a large audience, audience responses were found on websites where TV programmes are discussed, such as online fan forums and review websites, and the show had a strong fan base. This was important for my research as I wanted a wide range of responses on different platforms to create a sufficiently large data set for exploration of my research questions.

OI was chosen as it was made after MM and used the same docu-soap style. My initial thought was that comparing audience responses from OI and MM would allow me to explore how audiences respond to different texts. OI has a smaller fan base than MM which means that the number of audience responses was considerably fewer than for MM; I discuss the implications of this for my analysis later in the chapter.

The number of online responses was one of the most important criteria for my selection of wildlife docu-soaps. Wildlife docu-soaps are a relatively new TV genre and do not have much online reception when compared with other popular TV genres which often have a large and long-term fan base. I considered a range of wildlife docu-soaps including *Lemur Street* (2007-2008), but they were not included in my research as they ran for a shorter time, I was unable to find much online audience response and there was nothing on review platforms such as IMDb review or TV.com Review. This also highlights the high number of responses to MM compared to other wildlife docu-soaps and underlined its popularity, both of which made it appropriate to investigate for a PhD thesis.

I watched both MM and OI in order to get a general sense of what the programmes were like and to observe how characters and narratives were constructed. I especially watched and re-watched the episodes which audiences frequently discussed because I wanted to understand what textual elements they were responding to; they were also the episodes which attracted the largest number of posts which was an important reason for selecting them. This enabled me to identify their narrative structure and how animals were represented in the programmes.

4.3: Method: qualitative content analysis

In order to explore audience responses, I used qualitative conventional content analysis which enabled me to examine subtle meanings in the audiences' comments and was beneficial to gain insights into my data. In a foundational text, Lasswell, Lerner and Pool (1952) comment: '...content analysis is a technique which aims at ascribing, with optimum objectivity, precision, and generality, what is said on a given subject in a given place at a given time' (p. 34). Although Lasswell, Lerner and Pool focus on content analysis which is quantitative and objective, my focus on content analysis which is exclusively qualitative (Mayring, 2000; Patton, 2002; Forman & Damschroder, 2007). Neuman (1997) points out that content analysis concentrates on the meanings expressed and,

refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The 'text' is anything written, visual, or spoken that serve as a medium for communication (Neuman, 1997, p. 273).

This is precisely what I was interested in analysing which makes the method ideal for this study.

Conventional content analysis develops codes directly from data, rather than from existing codes or the literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is an inductive process. Codes quantify information by dividing it into groups based on shared meanings or themes. In other words, coding is the organisation of data through the use of categories (Jensen & Laurie, 2016) and ‘provide[s] the classification system for the analysis of qualitative data. Codes can represent topics, concepts, or categories of events, processes, attitudes or beliefs that represent human activity, and thought’ (Forman & Damschroder, 2007, p. 48). This allows a researcher to handle large amounts of data. I developed my own codes from emerging themes in the data as there was a limited amount of existing literature which could be applied to my research. By manually developing codes and systematically organizing the data, I was able to focus on the rich details of audiences’ responses and interactions. The code development and analysis was done qualitatively, which is in keeping with my research into the meanings of audience responses. This inductive technique was appropriate for my research as, ‘Inductive reasoning is the process of developing conclusions from collected data by weaving together new information into theories. The researcher analyses the text with an open mind in order to identify meaningful subjects answering the research question’ (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9-10). So, by coding in this way, I remained open to new insights arising from the data.

Content analysis focuses on what audience members write thereby revealing their attitudes and responses towards the animal characters and the programmes; it is a method which evaluates texts. Burger (1998) defines it as:

a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write [...] about. Content analysis assumes that behavioural patterns, values, and attitudes found in this material reflect and affect the behaviours, attitudes, and values of the people who created the material (p. 23).

My research concentrates on the audience's online comments which contain various expressions of emotions and values. Moreover,

conclusions can be drawn about the communicator, the message or text, the situation surrounding its creation – including the sociocultural background of the communication – and/or the effect of the message (White & Marsh, 2006, p. 27).

Although my research lacks sociocultural information about audience members, apart from some details of geographical location, this comment highlights the usefulness of using content analysis. Indeed, content analysis provides an opportunity to investigate not only audience responses online but also their interactions in online communities.

In the early stages of my research I considered a range of content analysis methods. For instance, directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) uses already existing theory as a foundation, and the use of existing frameworks can be useful to direct the researcher to solid variables and research goals, but because no theories or frameworks are available for analysing online audience responses to wildlife docu- soaps this method could not be used. There was also the possibility of using existing frameworks and adapting them, but I chose to develop my own framework as I wanted to base it on the themes that were present in my data. I also wanted to be open to new insights rather than sticking to a framework that had been developed for different purposes and that might have narrowed my focus. Summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is a quantitative method and focuses on the frequency of use of certain words, was also considered. However, focusing on the frequency of certain words could miss the rich detail and meanings of audience responses which were important for my analysis. I agree with Shoemaker and Reece (1996) who argue that:

reducing a large amount of text to quantitative data ... does not provide a complete picture of meaning and contextual codes, since texts may contain many other forms of emphasis besides sheer repetition (p. 29).

This is not to say that quantitative analysis is not valuable, but because I wanted to explore the uniqueness and nuances of audience responses I chose a qualitative coding approach, which enabled me to identify themes in the data which I might have missed if I had focused only on the frequency of certain words.

Additionally, an interpretative approach was used with the conventional content analysis method. The interpretative approach focuses on what the data says. Indeed, conventional content analysis allows researchers to gain insights through reading (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002) in order to generate their own codes. This method ‘goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text’ (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016, p. 318) and enabled me to explore recurrent themes and meanings in audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. Bowen (2009) comments that:

Documents should not be treated as necessarily precise, accurate, or complete recordings of events that have occurred. Researchers should not simply ‘lift’ words and passages from available documents to be thrown into their research report. Rather, they should establish the meaning of the document and its contribution to the issues being explored (p. 33).

An interpretative approach allowed the analysis to explore the meanings and emotions the online audience expressed, rather than finding relevant information based on a pre-existing framework applied to the data.

4.4: Method: textual analysis

As well as undertaking a qualitative content analysis of audience responses, I also undertook a textual analysis of an episode from each of MM and OI (Chapter 5). This was to provide the context to make sense of audience responses and also to understand the characteristics of the texts themselves. I analysed audience responses before undertaking the textual analysis and chose the episodes that generated a high level of responses.

McKee (2003) writes: 'When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text' (p. 1). In my textual analysis I make an 'educated guess' which, because of a text's multiple meanings and the range of ways it can be interpreted, is no more 'correct' than the interpretations evident in audience responses. Creeber (2006) highlights the danger of assuming that one's own interpretation represents all, or even some, of the readings made by people with different social and cultural identities. I therefore do not assume that my interpretation is representative of other's readings of the programmes. I present the textual analysis before audiences' responses because the audience responses include references to specific programmes and characters, and audience interactions are based on an assumption that others have also watched the programmes. By presenting the textual analysis first, I avoid having to repeatedly explain the characters and episodes and, for the purpose of my thesis, it makes more sense to present my analysis in this order.

Para-textuality adds another layer to what influences interpretation. Para-texts are 'those semi-textual fragments that surround and position the word' (Gray, 2003, p. 72). They can be created by anyone, thus, '...fans, critics and all manner of other interested parties can create their own para-texts', which may conflict with aspects of those media texts they relate to (Gray, 2008, p. 46). Creeber (2006) claims that it is especially difficult to determine the effects of texts when they are para-textual because they may inform how people make sense of media texts. Indeed, Tincknell and Raghuram (2002) suggest that audience interactions in online spaces, such as chat rooms, and their access to other sources of information, such as popular press articles, may inform their reading of media texts. The meanings of a media product are not constructed by the product solely but in connection to and with interactions with para-texts (Mittell, 2001). The way audience responses are informed by para- texts is part of what I analyse in later chapters, particularly in the case of MM where there are a linked research website, a book and an Animal Planet website.

Because of this recognition of multiple meanings and interpretations of texts, and the need to take into account the influence of para-textual materials, I take a post- structuralist approach to textual analysis. In a post-structuralist approach, 'analyzing media content was no longer understood as objectively examining or collecting data but as a "reading."' This term highlights the interpretive position of the researchers' (Fürsich, 2009, p. 240), and recognises that people from different cultural backgrounds see things and experience

reality differently (McKee, 2003). There are those, like Philo (2007), who question the usefulness of a textual analysis which stands alone and encourage the inclusion of other areas of analysis such as audience reception and understanding of production. Indeed, Philo (2007) claims that ‘all these elements must be understood and studied as part of a total system rather than in isolation as with studies which remain focused on texts’ (p. 194). Furthermore, a combination of methods to analyse television texts and their meaning is recommended by Creeber (2006). Combining an analysis of audience responses to media texts and para-texts with a textual analysis of the programmes will enable me to understand the different factors shaping audience responses.

4.5: Access and data sources

In order to investigate my research questions, I collected audience responses from three websites where audience responses and interactions were visible to outsiders and focused on the population of audience members which actively participated in the communities. This section will explain the advantages and disadvantages of using online comments as well as describing the three platforms I focused on: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube. I first highlight the advantages of using audience comments online for research.

One advantage relates to the point Bowen (2009) makes about documentary data: ‘documents are “unobtrusive” and “non-reactive”’ (p. 31). In other words, when analysing texts such as online audience comments, there is no researcher effect on audience responses as there is no direct social interaction. There is, however, a researcher effect during analysis because the researcher’s subjective understandings and interpretations of audience responses influence the codes, the coding process and the data analysis. In addition, there are other advantages of using audience responses online such as accessibility. Audience comments are publicly available and accessible to anyone with access to the Internet. Also, the availability of comments on public forums means that data was obtainable without having to ask permission; the ethical questions raised by the use of online data is discussed in Section 4-14 below. Making use of publicly available data increases its accessibility for other researchers who could replicate the research. However, a problem of retrievability must be noted as sometimes data can be deleted or blocked by users or websites. The wildlife docu-soaps I studied ended ten years ago (in 2008 and

2009), so in order to retain high retrievability, all the data gathered for this study was transferred and saved in Nvivo (a qualitative analysis software); this ensured that the data could be retrieved at a future date. In addition, my choice of online data was made because of its cost effectiveness in the context of my limited financial resources as a Ph.D. student. All of the above contributed to the suitability of online audience data for my research.

In order to explore whether online platforms shape audience responses, I collected data from IMDb, TV.com and YouTube, which differ in format, structure and writing conventions. IMDb is a review website which allows viewers to write reviews under 10,000 words in length but offers little opportunity for interaction; TV.com has a review section but also has forums which allow viewers to communicate with each other. Viewers are able to start a thread on any topic related to a programme such as ‘what is your favourite character’, and others can comment on the thread. YouTube has a completely different system: it is a video sharing website, and each video has a comment section where viewers can post. As viewers are allowed to reply to other users’ comments, interaction between them is facilitated, and they can also post videos as long as they comply with the user guidelines.

It is important to explain what these platforms are and the nature of the data I collected from each website. IMDb is an online movie database which provides information about and reviews of movies, TV programmes and games. Reviews that audience members wrote to recommend or criticise programmes were included in my analysis. In this way, aspects of the programmes that viewers liked/disliked or simply focused on were identified. The IMDb website was chosen as it is one of the biggest and most accessed databases for TV programmes. Indeed, it was the most accessed TV and movie database website in 2017 (Alexa, 2017). In spite of this, the website had no user review for OI. There was a page for the programme and a rating score, but no one had written a review; this means that none of my data for OI comes from this platform. In contrast, IMDb contained rich reviews for MM which made the website appropriate for my analysis. There were in total 24 reviews for MM, and all were included in my analysis. Figure 3, below, is a screenshot of some examples of audience reviews.

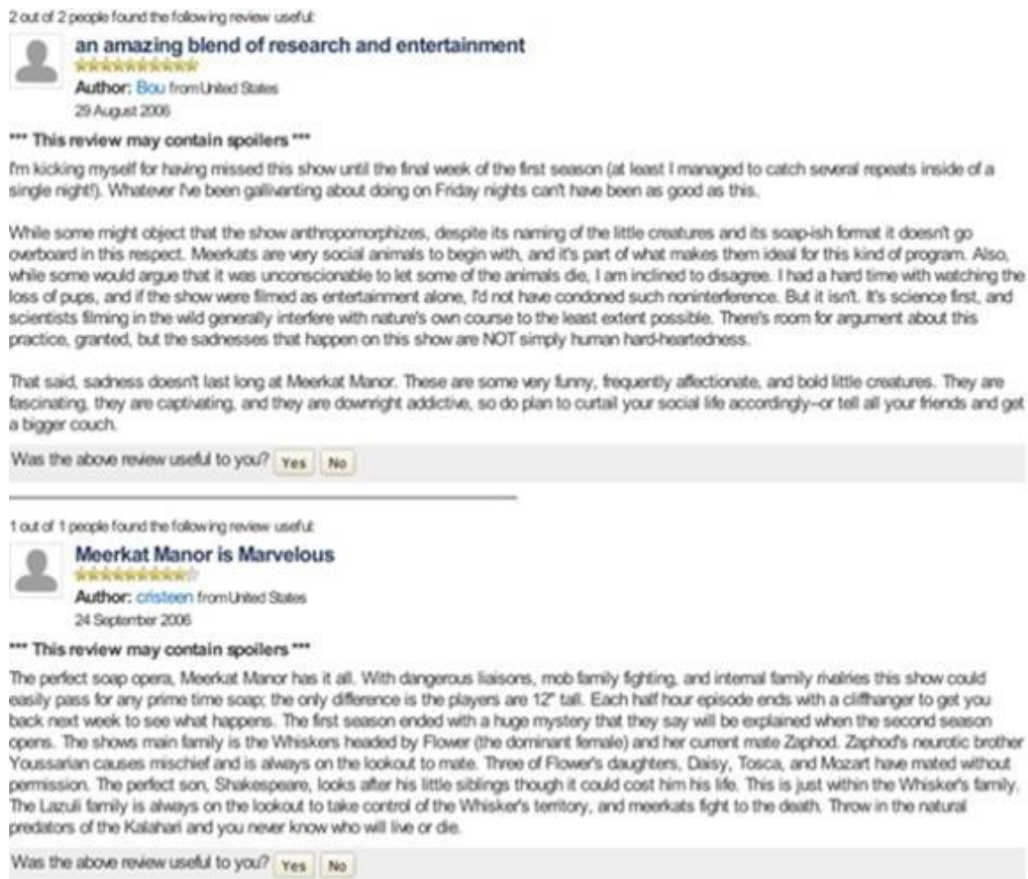



Figure 1: Screenshot of IMDb user review section

TV.com is another online database for TV programmes (it became defunct in 2019). The website has a strong emphasis on user-generated content which made it ideal for my analysis. Indeed, it contained users' reviews of programmes as well as online forums where audience members posted questions or comments. Anyone was able to answer questions and comments in the forums and there were lively interactions on this platform; this was one of the reasons it was chosen. It contained audience responses to and comments about OI as well as MM. There were in total 33 reviews (more than on IMDb) and 46 discussion threads for MM, and 12 reviews and 6 discussion threads for OI; all were included in the analysis. The image (Figure 4) below is a screenshot of an audience forum on TV.com.

Anyone know what happened to big Si?

[New](#) **page: 1 of** [« previous](#) | [next](#)

**Pumpkinstew**
member since: 02/26/06
level: 5
rank: Caveman Lawyer
posts: 5


[1]18 Mar 2007

I missed the first two episodes of the second series, and have just seen the next two where they have stated that Big Si is dead, and the Lazuli are leaderless.

Did they say how it happened?

(Incidentally we're only up to 2.4 in the UK although the shows are shown in pairs so we catch up fast. Don't spoil me please)

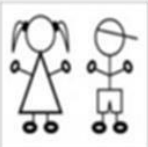
You must be [registered](#) and logged in to post a message.

**coolchris44**
member since: 01/30/07
level: 22
rank: Freak and Geek
posts: 3,079

[2]19 Mar 2007

i think he died because of an infection.

You must be [registered](#) and logged in to post a message.

**phf3947**
member since: 06/06/05
level: 71
rank: Bad News Bear
posts: 3,516

[3]19 Mar 2007

Figure 2: Screenshot of TV.com forum

YouTube is a website where people can upload videos and comment when the comment feature is enabled. This is the most important source of data for my research as it provided by far the highest number of audience responses. Each video has a comment section which works as a forum where people can exchange opinions and discuss topics regarding the video. This is different from TV.com forums where users interact in threads relating to particular topics. YouTube was chosen because it is the second most visited website internationally (Alexa, 2017), and it has more recent audience responses to MM and OI, even though both series initially aired years ago. Audience reviews and comments on all MM and OI related videos were analysed; these videos included both episodes of the programmes and fan-created videos such as a fan-made tribute to a character. Videos were

searched for on the website with programme titles that mentioned ‘Meerkat Manor’ and ‘Orangutan Island’. There were in total 4591 comments for MM and 239 comments for OI; all were included in the analysis. The image below (Figure 5) is a screen shot of the YouTube comment section.



Figure 3: Screenshot of YouTube comment section

I analysed audience reviews and comments as both contain audience responses to the programmes. As well as reviews and comments being different from each other and often written in different ways according to different conventions, the language used by posters on the different platforms also differed. I discuss these differences in the analysis chapters.

The amount of data I collected from each website was different and, in what follows, I describe it as if each poster is an audience member who has actually seen the programme and is responding to it. Of course, there is no way of telling if this is actually the case; posters may not have seen the programmes and they may not be telling the truth about their responses if they have seen them. In some cases this was made explicit and, especially on YouTube, there were posters who had not seen the programmes. However, for purposes of

analysis I refer to all posters as audience members because this is how they present themselves and there is no way, methodologically, of distinguishing between genuine audience members and others. This raises a more general question about posters being selective in their self- representation and the question of performativity. It is widely recognised that people perform themselves online (or off-line for that matter) thereby presenting themselves favourably (Gibbs et al., 2006) or in a complex way (Livingstone, 2008). Moreover, any form of communication can be viewed as a performance that takes place within norms and conventions. Thus, Goffman (1959) argues that everyday social interactions are a kind of theatrical performance while Butler's (1993) influential work on performativity highlights how the idea of self is connected to performance. This also applies to audience members posting online and IMDb posters, for instance, may present a professional persona to give an air of authority to their reviews. This performativity is an intrinsic part of the comments and, as such, I chose not to problematize it. I accept, however, that it is an inevitable part of online interaction, especially if we bear in mind that there is no way of knowing whether posters were actually part of the audience. Having said that, it is possible to make some observations about the way posters presented themselves on the different platforms. For example, on TV.com and IMDb posters tended to present themselves as viewers, on YouTube, people commented under videos that were directly related to the programmes, so there is a likelihood that they had at least watched the video they were commenting on though that is not a given. Taking into account all these provisos, and assuming that a user name referred to a single audience member, it is possible to document the number of times an individual user posted; this varied considerably with some posting over 200 times and others only once and can be seen in the table below. The figures are for TV.com forums and YouTube comments and not for IMDb and TV.com's review sections. This is because users normally only post one review, so there was no need to count how many times each user posted. Table 1 summarizes the number of posts per individual username.

	MM Number of contributors in TV.com	OI Number of contributors in TV.com	MM Number of contributors YouTube	OI Number of contributors YouTube
Number of comments				
Above 100			5	
91-100			2	
81-90			0	
71-80			2	
61-70			0	
51-60	1		2	
41-50	0		1	
31-40	2		5	
26-30	1		5	
21-25	0		12	
16-20	1		15	
11-15	4		24	
6-10	12	3	60	1
1-5	92	5	1284	171
Total no. of Users	113	8	1417	172

Table 1: Number of posts per username for OI and MM on TV.com and YouTube

It can be seen that there are big differences in numbers between MM and OI on both platforms and that the bulk of the comments are to be found on YouTube. Thus on TV.com forums, MM had in total 113 contributors and OI had only 8, on YouTube, MM had 1417 contributors while OI had 172. This shows the huge difference in the volume of data collected for the two programmes and across the different platforms. This subsequently influenced my analysis which was more focused on MM. Initially, I was hoping to generate more data for OI, but this was not possible. Moreover, MM had more users who contributed frequently to the comment sections. For instance, in the YouTube comment

sections, a user known as MeerkatGal commented 407 times, followed by iBaDvS1 who commented 189 times and FlowerOurQueen and Meerkatgirl1123 who both commented 110 times. Also, interestingly, some of the frequent users had user names related to MM such as MeerkatMeg21, Meerkat Queen 21, ShaksperetheMeerkat, Toscaforever and FlowerWhisker111. This trend was not found in OI.

The table also shows that many users only posted once. For instance, the number of YouTube users who commented only 1 to 5 times is 1284, and many of them only commented once. Moreover, for OI, only 1 user commented more than 5 times on YouTube. This suggests that interaction was more prolonged amongst MM audiences than OI audiences and that some users fit the definition of fan noted in Chapter 3. It is also significant for the formation of online communities which is the topic of Chapter 8.

This brief description of my data shows that I gathered significantly more audience data for MM than OI. Nevertheless the volume of audience responses to both programmes across the different platforms enabled me to draw some comparisons between responses to the programmes and to note differences in responses and the formation of online communities on the different platforms.

It should be noted that English was the language of the online audience responses. Most of the audience responses I found online were written in English, so this actually did not rule out much data. The possibility of gathering data in Japanese was considered in an early phase of my research; however, it quickly turned out that there were not many audience responses for MM written in Japanese. I only found a handful of comments on MM's Japanese official Facebook page, and decided not to include them in my analysis.

Related to this point, it should be noted that I am not a native English speaker. This created some difficulties for my analysis particularly because my research is on audience responses written in English which heavily depends on my ability to comprehend the language. The first difficulty was to understand nuances in audience responses which I was sometimes unaware of. The second difficulty I encountered was the use of language online which was sometimes unfamiliar to me. Many audience members use slang and shorten words when they write comments online. Although I was aware of most of the internet slang,

sometimes I encountered words that I was not familiar with. The third issue was that my perspectives and sense-making are rooted in the culture in which I grew up, and this created difficulties when I analysed audience responses from predominantly Western audiences. These difficulties were overcome by assistance from native speakers, including my supervisor and other post-graduate research students as well as post-doctoral researchers, who checked whether my understandings were plausible. Also, reading and re-reading the comments helped me to pick up the subtleties in audience responses and gave me more understanding of the context, the particular use of words within communities as well as a more general understanding of audience comments themselves. There were other issues which arose related to the use of irony and how I dealt with spelling mistakes; I discuss these below.

The data for my analysis was restricted to comments posted between 2005 and the point of analysis in June 2016; MM was broadcast between 2005 and 2008 and OI between 2007 and 2009. The cut-off point was 2016 as all the data collected were posted from 2005, and data collection had to be stopped at the point of analysis.

Also, I decided to exclude data which I deemed to be irrelevant to the content of the programmes even though it constituted part of the context of posting. Data included advertisements for unrelated products, such as a pair of shoes, which were posted on the forums, but not responded to by users. From a first glance at the data, the amount seemed to be manageable within my time frame, thus, all the data which fit my criteria (written in English, posted between 2005 and 2016 and relevant to the programmes) were included in the analysis.

For the textual analysis, I watched an episode each of MM and OI from Amazon Prime Video. How each episode was selected will be explained in Chapter 5. Both were available through a purchase. For MM, the version I purchased was American. There are some differences between the American and British versions of MM but, in Amazon Prime, only the American version was available. Though, it should be noted that I also watched the British version of the episode through YouTube, and there were only minor differences between the two versions; I discuss this further in Chapter 5.

Having described my data sources and my research methods, I now turn to the way I analysed my data.

4.6: Analysis: Coding

In this section I focus on my analysis, looking in turn at qualitative code development, qualitative content analysis of audience responses, and textual analysis of the programmes.

Codes were developed as part of the analytical process and in order to take my analysis forward with the assistance of qualitative analysis software Nvivo. Nvivo facilitated the combination or separation of codes and I kept notes of my thoughts during the entire coding process. The coding process started with the reading and re-reading of the data to get a general idea of what aspects of the programmes audience members focused on and talked about. This is recommended by Forman and Damschroder (2007): ‘By examining the data as it is collected, the researcher will become familiar with its informational content, and may identify new topics to be explored and develop analytic hunches and connections that can be tested as analysis progresses’ (p. 46). I took notes on my thoughts and findings which was useful to keep track of how the research developed (Morse and Richards, 2002) and were essential for the early stage of my analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2007). This way of coding is an open coding method as codes are developed through repeated and careful reading of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994); it is especially appropriate, ‘[i]n studies where no theories are available, [where] you must generate categories inductively from the data’ (Zhang & Wildemouth, 2016, p. 320).

The coding process was done manually because ‘the computer is simply unable to understand human language in all its richness, complexity, and subtlety as can a human coder’ (Simon, 2001, p. 81). Newbold et al. (2002) also claim that content analysis should be carried out manually by a human researcher. Neuendorf (2002) agrees observing that: ‘the notion of the completely ‘automatic’ content analysis via computer is a chimera [...] the human contribution to content analysis is still paramount’ (p. 40). NVivo, was used to store all the data as well as to keep track of the coding process. As Macnamara (2005) comments ‘it is most likely that use of computers enhances accuracy of analysis’ (p. 7). Thus computer-aided analysis was carried out rather than computer analysis.

The coding process involved what Krippendorff (2004) refers to as a hermeneutic loop: ‘recontextualizing, reinterpreting, and redefining the research until some kind of satisfactory interpretation is reached’ (p. 87-88). This process leads to continuous interpretations of data which allows different meanings to emerge and new interpretations of data to be developed (White & Marsh, 2006). Such a process was useful for my analysis as ‘open coding and its characteristics of making use of questioning and constant comparisons enable investigators to break through subjectivity and bias’ (Cobin & Strauss, 1990, p. 423). Although subjectivity cannot be avoided, constant comparisons and continuous interpretations allowed me to try to counter my own assumptions and to gain new insights into the audience’s responses. For example, when I began my study, I had a strong interest and belief that wildlife docu-soaps must be beneficial as they educated the public about conservation and I included conservation in the first coding list; however, as I continued reading the data, it emerged that conservation was not as widely discussed as I had anticipated, so I eliminated the conservation code. This continuous reading and interpretation of data enabled me to identify patterns, concepts and themes which I later converted into codes.

Categories were developed which grouped together codes relating to a similar theme. An illustration of this is provided by my first coding list, where the codes ‘death’ and ‘romance’ were categorized as ‘aspects of the story’. Later, these codes were moved to a category called ‘narratives and story’ which more accurately reflected one of the themes. Figure 6 shows the relationship between a category, ‘human-animal relations’, and the codes grouped within that category. Categories and codes were seen as “in-progress” which meant they were formulated from a first reading of the data and were developed and revised over time; in all my coding list went through 4 iterations.

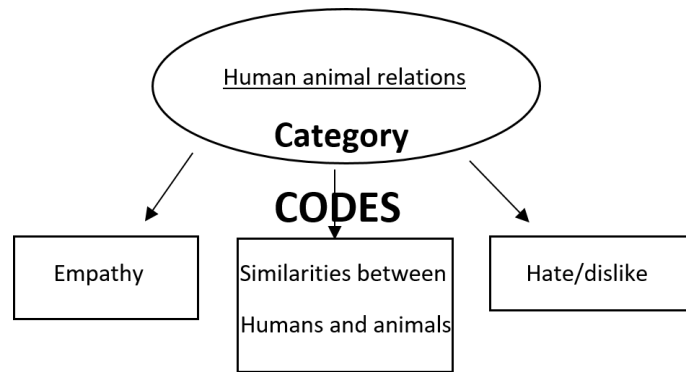


Figure 4: A category and codes

As discussed above, the first set of categories and codes was hugely influenced by the assumptions that I brought to the research and included conservation issues and educational values (the first set of codes can be found in Appendix A). Also, several aspects of the early codes reflected my ways of thinking and use of language in the early stages of my research. For instance, the code about taking care of offspring was initially named ‘child caring’ which, on reflection, could be regarded as anthropomorphic, especially as the young of many animals are not referred to as children. Also, positive and negative emotion codes were described as “good” and “bad” which was inappropriate because this perception of “good” and “bad” were based on my own value judgements and assumptions. Later I became aware of these assumptions and changed the code names to positive and negative emotions; these terms focus on affective state rather than being based on my own judgements about what is good or bad. In this way I revised and edited the codes as I became aware of my own assumptions and re-read the data; this process led to the second set of codes.

This second set retained some aspects of the first but also included new codes (see Appendix B). Thus, the conservation category was deleted. In addition, the coding relating to anthropomorphic language was too vague as it included motivations, emotions, traits and behaviours. Instead, humanization, de-humanization and individualisation codes were created under the category anthropomorphism. The ‘emotions’ and ‘aspects of story’ categories were retained and revised in the second set. Codes such as morality were turned into a category while traditional gender/family role codes were excluded as they were

found to be too specific. A fan community category was added to the second set, as such aspects were frequently found in the audience's comments. Nature and human intervention codes were added as discussion on whether humans should interfere with nature frequently occurred in audience comments and was a distinctive feature of audience responses. Also, an education category and a 'responses to the programmes' category were created. The education category included codes that focus on seeking or providing information, and the responses to the programme category included expressions of like or dislike of the programmes. The second coding list was then used for a pilot study which revealed the following problems:

- 1) There were too many categories which made the coding list unmanageable for analytical purposes;
- 2) Some categories appeared not to be distinctive enough, the reasoning being that each category needed to be internally consistent but also externally distinctive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985);
- 3) Some codes overlapped;
- 4) New themes which audience members frequently discussed were found through more readings of the data;
- 5) Several codes were not frequently used, which meant that audience members did not discuss those topics often, so they were deleted.

As a result of this process, a third version of the coding set was developed and the whole dataset was carefully read for another month. The codes were revised to ensure their distinctiveness and clarity, and several new codes emerged while other codes were deleted or integrated. The third set of codes had four categories which were as distinct and independent. These changes made the coding list more coherent, simple and manageable. Some topics were too infrequent which meant that the topic was not actively talked about by the online audience and the code was deleted. For instance, after several re-readings of the data, it was found that anger was rarely expressed towards animal characters, thus, the anger code was eliminated from the set; this did not mean that anger did not appear as it was coded under the hate/dislike code instead. Other codes were eliminated because they were similar to each other. For example, the humanization code overlapped with the individualisation code, so the humanization code was eliminated from the set. Several new codes also emerged. For instance, it was found that audience members frequently argued

about animal characters, so an argument code was added to the set. The early stages of the coding lists, coding list versions 1 to 3, can be viewed in Appendix A, B and C).

For the final set of codes, several further changes were made. Naming and individualisation were separated into two codes as the audience used individual characters' names and referred to individual character traits separately. Thus, individuals' names such as Saturnus were simply used to refer to the individual character while individual traits were used for various reasons such as reasoning about the character's behaviour – 'Flower is a kind and strong mother who takes care of the family'. Also, characters being killed was separated from the deaths of characters. Although these two concepts were closely related, their definitions and the audience members' uses of them were totally different. A multi-sourcing code was also added, as the audience frequently referenced other information sources (para-texts) to gain information about the programmes and characters, which seemed to have an influence on their responses. The list of categories and codes with their definitions and examples is shown below (Table 2).

Category	Code name	Definition	Example
Human-animal relationship	Naming	Individual name of non-human characters	Flower, Saturnus etc.
	Individualisation	Comments on individual traits/qualities of animals	He is unpredictable and has serious social problems.
	Similarity between humans and animals	Comments which highlight similarity	they're so much like people

		between humans and non-human animals including ascribing human qualities to non-human characters	
	Difference between humans and animals	Comments that highlight animality/non-humanness of animals and differences between humans and other animals.	Animals have no "feelings"
	Sympathy	Sympathy and sorrow expressed towards non-human characters	I feel bad for flower now that she is dead
	Love/like	Love and like expressed towards non-human characters	I think that I love him so much
	Hate/dislike	Hate, dislike and anger expressed towards non-human characters	I hate those Cobras!
	Species	Mention of a specific species category	Human, meerkat etc.
	Misanthropy	Misanthropic attitude shown by the audience	HUMANS ARE PARASITES AND GREEDY

	Human destruction	Comments which mention human destruction of nature	we already mess with nature enough, through urban expansion and deforestation
Narrative and Story	Death	Death of non-human characters	He passed March 4, 2011
	Killing	Killing among non-human characters	the Commandos killing the pups
	Birth	Birth/reproduction of non-human characters	Flower gave birth
	Romance	Romantic relationship among non-human characters	Flower and Zaphod are together forever!
	Fight	Fight/conflict among non-human characters	she evicted Tosca
	Positive moral judgement	Positive judgement towards qualities/actions of non-human characters	this brave little Meerkat who cared so much for her family.
	Negative moral judgement	Negative judgement towards qualities/actions of non-human characters	Flower just cheated on Zaphod with Houdini... WHO-RE!
Fan community	Support	Comments which support the actions/opinions of other fans	awesome video 5 stars

	Instrumental questioning	Comments which ask questions to other fans/seeking information from other fans about fan-created content	What program did you use?
	Socialising	Online fan socialising	Haha, thank you, Shay! <3
	Arguments	Online arguments/conflicts among fans or between fans and non-fans	you haters GO FUCK YOURSELVES YOU SONS OF BITCHES!
	Information seeking	Comments which question the shows	How do they distinguish which meerkat is which
	Information providing	Comments which explain the shows	The meerkats have dark spots on their backs, shoulders, tail bases, etc. to distinguish them.
	Multiple information sources	Comments which reference other sources related to the programmes such as official websites and books	Anyway, in the book it lists the facts not the MM stories
Media literacy	Critical	Critical analysis and evaluation of the programmes including plot lines	sure there is some tricky editing to make the story work

	Uncritical	Acceptance of face values of the programmes	it is the hard facts of life in the Kalahari and it is an amazing show.
	Nature	Opinions that nature should not be interfered with by humans	but nature makes things happen like that.. no one can do anything,
	Human Intervention	Opinions that human intervention is necessary	they could have saved them!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
	Science orientated	Opinions that the programmes are more science/education ³ orientated	Meerkat Manor is a very educational show
	Entertainment orientated	Opinions that the programmes are more entertainment orientated	This show is like a little soap but with meerkats as the lead characters.
	Love/like programmes	Positive emotions expressed towards the programmes	I love this show!!!
	Hate/dislike programmes	Negative emotions expressed towards the programmes	ARRRGHGH!!!! this show is so stupid I SWEAR!

Table 2: The final coding list

³ On reflection I can see that this combination of science and education might be problematic as they are not the same thing. This is further discussed in the section on reflexivity in this chapter.

The descriptions of all codes were carefully recorded, since detailed descriptions ensure the validity of codes. They also ensured transparency concerning how variables from the data were extracted which is essential for validity and reliability (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). The transparency of the coding scheme is important as ‘near the heart of content analysis; if the coding is not reliable, the analysis cannot be trusted’ (Singletary, 1993, p. 294). After establishing the final set of codes with clear definitions, I applied these codes to the entire dataset to analyse the data.

4.7: Application of codes

After establishing the final coding structure it was applied to the whole dataset according to the definition of each category through NVivo with the same set of codes being used for both MM and OI audience responses. In order to apply the codes, a coding list was created. A coding list ‘...provides researchers involved in the project with a consistent framework for conducting the research’ (Macnamara, 2005, p. 9). The coding list included all categories and codes from Table 2 and was used to ensure consistent and reliable coding. The definition of each code was constantly checked and confirmed throughout the process to prevent ‘...drifting into an idiosyncratic sense of what the codes mean’ (Schilling, 2006, p. 33). The process of coding was carried out twice in order to ensure consistency.

4.8: Intra-rater reliability

After the application of the codes, I checked the reliability of the coding. Where there is more than one coder, inter-rater reliability refers to researchers reaching the same conclusion by using a coding scheme (Jensen & Laurie, 2016). In other words, it refers to a consistency of coding between different people. It is also connected to the transparency of techniques which allow other researchers to reproduce the results (Armstrong et al., 1997). Inter-rater reliability is not just an overall correlational agreement but also measures ‘the extent to which the different judges tend to assign exactly the same rating to each object’ (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000, p. 98). As Neuendorf (2002) claims,

There is growing acknowledgement in the research literature that the establishment of inter-coder reliability is essential, a necessary criterion for valid and useful research when human coding is employed (p. 142).

This is because interpretations of the data could differ among individuals, and research needs to ensure that data is categorized reliably by all coders. Also, 'human coders are subject to fatigue and are likely to make more mistakes as the coding proceeds' (Zhang & Wildemouth, 2017, p. 322). The consistency of the coding process was an important issue for my research as it was closely related to the reliability and validity of the research and the coding set. Instead of incorporating inter-rater reliability into the methods via the use of several coders, however, I used an intra-rater reliability test as I coded the whole dataset myself. Intra-rater reliability tests the consistency of coding carried out by one researcher. To do this, I coded the dataset twice and compared the results of the first and second coding. Considering the amount of data I was handling, mistakes in coding over time were a possibility. Moreover, over time, definitions of each code could be misrecognized and trigger an inconsistency of coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I carried out a reliability test using SPSS which showed a high consistency in the coding process. This is done by comparing the first and second coding to see how much of it was the same. All the data was coded twice which meant that 100% of the data was tested for intra-coder reliability. There were in total 17,611 cases for MM and 604 cases for OI (cases mean coded items). Interclass correlations were used as estimates of intra-rater reliability between the first and the second coding results on the same dataset.

The Interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) showed the level of agreement between the first and the second coding results from 0.00 to 1.00. Cronbach's alpha measured the consistency and reliability of the two coding processes by checking whether the two coding results were coding the same items by giving a value from 0.00 to 1.00. As a result, for the MM analysis the ICC was 1.0 with a 95% confidence interval from 0.9 to 1.0, and a Cronbach's alpha value of 1.0. For the OI analysis, the ICC was 0.8 with a 95% confidence interval from 0.7 to 0.9, and a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.9. Nunnally (1978) claims that 0.7 is an indication of acceptable reliability. Hence, the reliability test results show high consistency during the coding analysis, a high level of agreement in each case and similar

measures being used; both MM's and OI's ICC were above 0.7. This showed that my coding was consistent and therefore reliable.

4.9: Qualitative analysis procedure

After the reliability of the coding was established, I moved to qualitative analysis of the audience responses. Qualitative analysis was carried out by careful readings of audience comments. For instance, I found that the sympathy code and the individualisation code often occurred together in the same comment, so those comments which contained both codes were read thoroughly to see what further details and connections could be found. This allowed me to explore nuances and details which could have been missed from a reading of each code separately. Thus, I found that the perception of each animal character as a unique individual was a prerequisite for expressing sympathy, and that animal characters were recognized as distinct individuals with their own unique personalities and life history. Such findings helped to uncover more details of the relationships between codes. Unpicking the relationships between codes is important as it provides more insight into audiences' responses. For example, I found that the same sentence was frequently coded as individualisation and as the name of the individual which meant that names were associated with particular individual characteristics. This tells us that the poster recognizes animals' individual characteristics and this was reflected in their comments.

It is appropriate here to discuss how I addressed some specific issues when analysing audience comments. I focus on three issues: misspellings; the use of words with a negative; and the use of irony. There were many spelling mistakes in the audience responses; they are especially found on social platforms where users' identity is anonymised as was the case on the platforms included in my research (Harris & Hiltunen, 2014). They were often minor, such as writing 'your' instead of 'you're' or misspelling characters' names as when 'Shakespeare' was spelled as 'Shakspare' or 'Shakepear'. Most of the time I knew what the correct spellings were. However, on the rare occasion when a response was unintelligible and I was unable to identify what a user meant to write, the comment was excluded from the analysis. Examples are 'H' and 'Ollllk'. As most of the spelling mistakes were minor, they had little impact on my analysis. Also, it should be noted that

when citing the text of posts in my analysis, I reproduce spelling mistakes, adding the correct spelling in brackets such as Shakspare [Shakespeare].

The second issue is when key words such as love are used in a negative expression which happened quite frequently. For instance, an audience member might comment, 'I do not love Flower! I hate her'. In this sentence, the word 'love' is part of a negative expression and this meaning was reflected in my coding and rather than coding the word 'love', the phrase in which it appeared would have been coded as 'hate/dislike towards a character'. The qualitative analysis of audience responses was done through careful reading, so that a positive word used in a negative expression was read and understood in relation to the context in which it was used.

The third issue is the possibility of comments being ironic. Bamman and Smith (2015) argue that an understanding of someone's typical ways of communicating and personality, enables others to recognise sarcastic comments. In my analysis, I could sometimes tell if a comment was ironic especially when a poster frequently commented online; I was able to find a pattern in the responses of those who commented on YouTube more than 50 times, for instance. Also, in some cases, I could tell from interactions among the users that the comment was made in an ironic way as the interactions gave me a context to understand the intention of the comment (Wallace, Kertz & Charniak, 2014). However, in many instances, it was very hard to know if the user was being ironic. In fact, Carvalho et al. (2011) point out the challenge of identifying positive opinions when there is a presence of irony in online comments. I always kept in mind the possibility that a comment could be made in an ironic way, and I did my best to detect irony from the context, but this is clearly an area where it is difficult to be certain that my interpretation reflected the intention of the poster.

4.10: Textual analysis

The process of textual analysis, as I have already discussed, is interpretative. Vande Berg et al. (1998) recommend that the researcher 'start[s] with the text and/or textualizations and see where they take them, rather than starting with some judgements and then searching out evidence to support them' (p. 299). In other words, they recommended that the researcher is open to the various potential meanings of a text. This is similar to

Krippendorff's (2004) 'hermeneutic loop' mentioned in the qualitative code analysis above. As such, I repeatedly watched a particular episode from both MM and OI in order to analyse them in relation to the status of wildlife docu-soap as hybrid genre. The next chapter includes the full account of this analysis as well as the production details of MM and OI.

The language used in the textual analysis needs to be explained. In the descriptions of segments of the programmes, I often reproduce the anthropomorphism of the narration. For example, the mating of non-human animals is often referred to as 'romance' and certain words are used to characterise animals' behaviours, such as 'motherly'. I reproduce this language, which Crist (2000) calls 'ordinary', in my analysis as it has the effect of emphasizing similarities between humans and animals. The choice of language to explain animals' behaviours is always constrained: it is either between a technical or scientific language or a language which is anthropomorphic. An effect of the so-called objective language that characterizes technical and scientific discourse is that it distances animals from humans as I noted in Chapter 2. Hence, I made a decision to use anthropomorphic descriptions of animals' behaviours which not only reflects the language used in the programmes but also my understanding that humans and animals share many similarities in their social lives and in their behaviours and emotions.

4.11: Reflections

Burnard (1995) argues that self-reflection is an essential part of qualitative content analysis, and here I reflect on the assumptions I brought to my research and how they affected it. I have already mentioned how my assumptions about wildlife documentaries influenced code development, here I discuss the way my views about science, education and entertainment, and the relations between them, affected my whole PhD.

As can be seen in the final set of codes, the education code is defined as 'opinions that the programmes are more science/education orientated'. In this code I took science and education to be synonymous and, on reflection, this assumption is highly problematic and closes off other views of education, such as its being linked to affect. I also, initially, made a distinction between education and entertainment, regarding them as mutually exclusive. However, as I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, this is a false dichotomy; science and

entertainment are not two separate aspects of wildlife documentaries, and both can be educational. These assumptions are embedded in my coding list, but my recognition of them has allowed me to compensate for this in my analysis. I also assumed that science was objective, i.e. true, and therefore of more educational value than entertainment. This is connected to the fact that my first degree was in a science subject and is reflected in my writing style; I tried to write in a 'scientific', 'objective' way and avoided writing in the first person. Traces of this remain though I have tried to eliminate it. Also, in earlier versions of this chapter, I found myself defending my use of qualitative analysis by talking about its 'objectivity' and 'reliability'. Section 4-6 in this chapter is an example of my assumption that objectivity is possible and that using 'scientific, objective' language is better than, for instance, anthropomorphic ways of representing animals. My language resisted the idea that animals were like humans, and that talking about their social relations in words that are normally used for human social relations exemplified an unjustified assumption of similarities between animals and humans. I became aware of this during the writing of my thesis and have rewritten those sections where it affected my analysis. I have also commented on it in my discussion of coding above. This focus on objectivity and objective language conflicted with my post-structuralist approach and recognition that interpretations and meanings are many and varied.

In this section I have reflected on how my own biases and assumptions influenced not only my coding processes but also the whole thesis. I came to increasingly be aware of them through my PhD journey and although they may still lurk in some parts of my thesis, especially in the education code, I am now much more aware of how they have shaped my PhD and have tried to make this explicit at appropriate points.

I now turn to a consideration of the ethics of doing online research.

4.12: Ethical considerations

I consulted the British Sociological Association's (2017) Statement of Ethical Practices and British Sociological Association's (2016) Ethical Guideline and Collated Resources for Digital Research for ethical guidelines to support my research. One of the difficulties of the online environment is that the distinction between private and public can be blurred,

especially on social media sites where people are likely to use their real names and present personal information. Indeed, Zimmer (2010) comments that ‘Concerns over consent, privacy and anonymity do not disappear simply because subjects participate in online social networks; rather, they become even more important’ (p. 324).

The blurring of the distinction between public and private is also a problem on websites. Although all audience responses on the websites I accessed for my research were publicly available, audience members may think of their acts of commenting and interacting with other members as private, and they may not be aware that their comments could be used by a researcher. In fact, I am using their responses for purposes that the posters did not intend, and nor can they have reasonably expected their comments to be used for this purpose. This means that posters engage in posting on a forum with an assumption about the rules of the forum, and as a researcher I am guided by different rules. Zimmer (2006) remarks that information being public does not grant a researcher permission to use it.

Despite this, I suggest that my use of audiences’ responses is legitimate because all their responses are ‘open’ such that anyone with access to the internet can see them. Because ‘open forum’ data are made public and visible to anyone, Rodhan and Gavin (2006) comment that, ‘Individual contributions to the message board can therefore be considered in the same way as individual naturalistic observations in a public space’ (p. 94). In a sense, posters can expect to be observed in this kind of space, like anyone in an offline public space, although they may not expect their comments to be used for research. Moreover, Eysenbach and Till (2001) comment that the blurred line between private and public in online spaces can be clarified by certain things such as the privacy level of a site; they give examples including: whether registration and subscription are needed to see responses, and the rules and codes governing the community, such as explicit guidelines about who can and cannot join the community. The online platforms I investigated do not require any registration or subscription to observe responses, and the online communities I observed are open to anyone; this means that anyone with internet access can join. This supports my claim that the online spaces I explored in my thesis are public, even though they are owned by private companies. Of course, like any observational study, the anonymity of participants is my top priority. Hence, in my research, users’ real names and private information such as home address are not recorded, used or made available. Indeed, this would not have been possible because individual posters had usernames and kept their

real identities anonymous. Although the comments and communities that are the subject of my research exist online, this does not mean that they are not real (Kozinets, 2002). I respect the communities and the audiences that make up these communities, and their privacy and anonymity have been a priority in my research. I have been careful not to misrepresent or devalue the communities and their members in any way, but, instead, have tried my best to present the uniqueness of the audiences, their responses, and the communities in which they participate.

4.13: Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methods I used in my research and how the analysis was done. I chose to use qualitative conventional content analysis as it captures the details and nuances of audience responses and allows an analysis of meaning. The reading and re-reading of audience responses was important to gain insights into my data and become aware of my own assumptions as well as finding recurrent themes and topic in the audience responses. My research focused on two wildlife docu- soaps: Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island, and I have shown that I gathered significantly more data for MM. I do not think this is a problem as the data available enabled me to draw comparisons in audience responses between the two programmes which was one of the reasons for including them both in my study. Similarly, the amount of data I gathered from the different platforms was significantly different, as was its character; thus the YouTube comment section proved to be the most important source of data. I have also reflected on how being a non-native English speaker, affected my understanding and analysis of the data and how the assumptions I brought to the research influenced the issues that I thought would be important; I have also described how I tried to overcome the biases that these assumptions introduced into my research. I have described how the analysis was done, including the iterative process of establishing codes, and how the codes were improved and revised over time. I have also discussed textual analysis as a method, how I applied it to an episode each of MM and OI, and how it relates to my analysis of audience responses. One of my concerns in the analysis chapters is to explore the extent to which audience responses are shaped by the text itself and by the interaction in online communities and my textual analysis contributes towards this exploration. The next four chapters present my data analysis and, in the next chapter, I present my textual analysis.

Chapter 5: Textual analysis of Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island

In this chapter, I undertake a textual analysis of a sample episode from each of Meerkat Manor (MM) and Orangutan Island (OI) and provide information about the characters and storylines. I will discuss key elements of MM and OI, such as major plot points, and describe their narrative structures. This is important for two reasons: it provides a context for audience responses, and allows me to relate audience responses to key features of the texts. This chapter starts with an overview of the storylines, the main characters and how they are represented as individuals with different personalities. I then analyse an episode from each of MM and OI, drawing on the analytical framework developed in the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3). I go on to discuss the categorisation of MM and OI as wildlife docu-soap despite having different narrative structures and settings. The chapter ends with details of the programmes' production and the cultural and linguistic variation between UK and US versions of MM.

5.1: Meerkat Manor and Orangutan Island: the storylines

5.1.1: Meerkat Manor

MM tells the story of a group of meerkats living in the Kalahari Desert and has a strong element of soap opera; it is linked to a Cambridge University research project investigating meerkat social life (Clutton-Brock, 2010). The first three seasons of MM focus on the rise and fall of a powerful family - the Whiskers – the main meerkat group which is led by a matriarch named Flower. The story focuses on social interactions among the characters especially between the female meerkats and the matriarch. The fourth and last season focuses on the ups and downs of the inexperienced females leading various groups after the death of Flower at the end of season 3. This focus on female leaders is typical of MM; although there are also male leaders, the story pays less attention to them.

Season 1's story focuses on the rise of the Whiskers as they grow to be one of the biggest groups in the area. While they have many internal conflicts and incidents, Flower, their leader, manages them while maintaining her position as the dominant female. As well as internal conflicts they face external threats from predators and from a rival, neighbouring group, the Lazuli; they manage to get through these crises due to Flower's strong leadership. The second season opens after a time lapse of 3 months and continues to tell the story of the internal and external conflicts Flower and the Whiskers face. Internal tensions between the female characters – Flower, and her daughters, Mozart, Tosca and Daisy - intensify. In this season the Commandos are a constant threat to the Whiskers, and are portrayed as well-organized, fearsome enemies. There is also a focus on the rival group from the previous season, the Lazuli. Season 3 focuses on the decline of the Whiskers, the death of Flower, and the emergence of new groups led by younger females. After the death of Flower, Rocket Dog tries to lead the Whiskers, her sister Maybelline leaves the Whiskers and forms a new group called the Aztecs and Mozart forms a new group called Starsky.

Eventually Mozart is left alone and dies. The Zappa, a new rival group this season, also struggle with internal conflicts. Season 4 focuses on the new generation of matriarchs: Maybelline of the Aztecs, Nikita of the Commandos and Rocket Dog of the Whiskers. Maybelline continues leading the Aztecs from the last season, but many members have returned to the Whiskers. Season 4's subtitle is 'The Next Generation', and it focuses on these new, inexperienced leaders and their different styles of leadership.

The story highlights Flower as one of the strongest and most successful leaders of the Kalahari. She keeps the group together until her death. The story is told in terms of families – the Whiskers, the Lazuli, the Commandos – with the rival groups being referred to as neighbours. It starts with Flower making the group stronger with her leadership despite various internal and external conflicts, and the internal conflicts often happen among female characters regarding reproduction. Her life ends in Season 3, when she fights with a cobra to protect her family – a dramatic end for the leader of the Whiskers. Mozart also has a strong storyline throughout. She starts as a caring daughter of Flower, but her pregnancy leads to her eviction from the Whiskers family. She forms a new group, though after a series of unfortunate events, the group dies out, and Mozart eventually dies alone. The fourth season has a quite different structure due to the absence of Flower; its

subtitle is ‘The New Generation’, and as it suggests, it focuses on new, inexperienced leaders and their struggles.

5.1.2: Orangutan Island

Compared to MM, Orangutan Island (2007-2009) has a different story-line and setting. The story focuses on orang-utans in a rehabilitation centre who have been orphaned by the destruction of their habitat and the breakup of their families caused by humans. They grow up together in a place called Forest School Class 103 where humans teach them essential skills for survival. At a certain stage, the orang-utans are placed on a fenced island called Orangutan Island to develop their skills so that one day they can return to the wild. As the name Forest School Class 103 implies, those orang-utans are portrayed like school children while the older inhabitants of neighbouring Palas Island are referred to as teenagers. The story focuses on the community which these orang-utans create, and can be seen as analogous in format to reality TV shows, such as Big Brother or Love Island, where participants are placed together in an artificial community. The story of season 1 focuses on the arrival of the orang-utans of Forest School Class 103 on Orangutan Island, and their struggle to settle into their new environment – away from their human carers – and to cooperate with each other in order to learn the skills necessary for survival. While most make it to the end of the season, some die or are injured. Another storyline is the orangutans working out the hierarchy in the group, and the emergence of the male leader Hamlet. This is a contrast to MM which focused on female leaders. As in MM, each character has a distinct personality and gets used to their new life on the island in different ways. Season 2 continues to focus on the same group of orangutans but the neighbouring Palas Island orangutans also feature; they are also being rehabilitated but are older and with more experience of living independently. Lone Drøschner Nielsen, who is a project leader of the rehabilitation centre and frequently appears in the programme, removes the barrier between the two islands in the hope that the older orangutans will teach the youngsters the skills needed to survive in the wild. Season 2 focuses on the orangutans of both islands forming bonds and creating a new community.

The main story-line of OI focuses on orphaned orangutans whose habitat and family have been destroyed due to various human activities. The rehabilitation centre teaches them the

skills to survive in the wild, and their skills are tested on the island. In season, 2, older and more experienced orangutans join them. Although there are some incidents, the two groups eventually tolerate each other and teach each other skills that are beneficial for surviving in the wild. They build a new community to live in together.

Although the main focus of the story is on the interactions of the animal characters, humans make frequent appearances, especially the project leader, Lone Drøscher Nielsen. This marks OI out from MM where there is no human presence in the story. In MM, the Cambridge University researchers make an occasional appearance before an episode starts when the narrator explains that MM is based on scientific research; this lasts only a few seconds. In MM, the researchers are ostensibly not interfering in what is going on amongst the meerkats whereas in OI the humans are central to the rehabilitation of the orangutans. In OI, human helpers bring food to the orang-utans at certain times of a day, and when orang-utans are injured, they are taken to the vet. In one episode, the show also mentions the presence of a human guard, presumably against poachers and illegal loggings. Although the island is wild in terms of the environment and presence of other species such as macaque monkeys, coral snakes, native trees and plant species, part of the environment is also artificially created by humans: the orangutans are transported to the island by the facility members by boat, and the island is surrounded by an electric fence. Moreover, the narrator explains that structures, such as feeding platforms, are created to facilitate interactions among the orang-utans and are also useful when human helpers count the orang-utans. The programme once shows the counting, but the narrator explains that one of the orang-utans has failed to appear for three days in a row, so presumably humans count the orang-utans every day to ensure their safety.

5.2: Central characters

Both MM and OI individualise the animals, creating distinct characters with their own names and personalities. This section will introduce some of the most important characters at the centre of the series. I show how the personalities of individual meerkats are revealed through the narration and this sets up expectations about how each character will behave.

5.2.1: MM characterisation

Meerkat Manor (2005-2008) introduces the characters at the beginning of each episode. The description is usually the same but, for some characters, it is different in the different seasons to reflect their development as the story unfolds. The character's name and personality traits are read out by the narrator, and also appear on the screen with a visual image; this is shown in Figure 1.

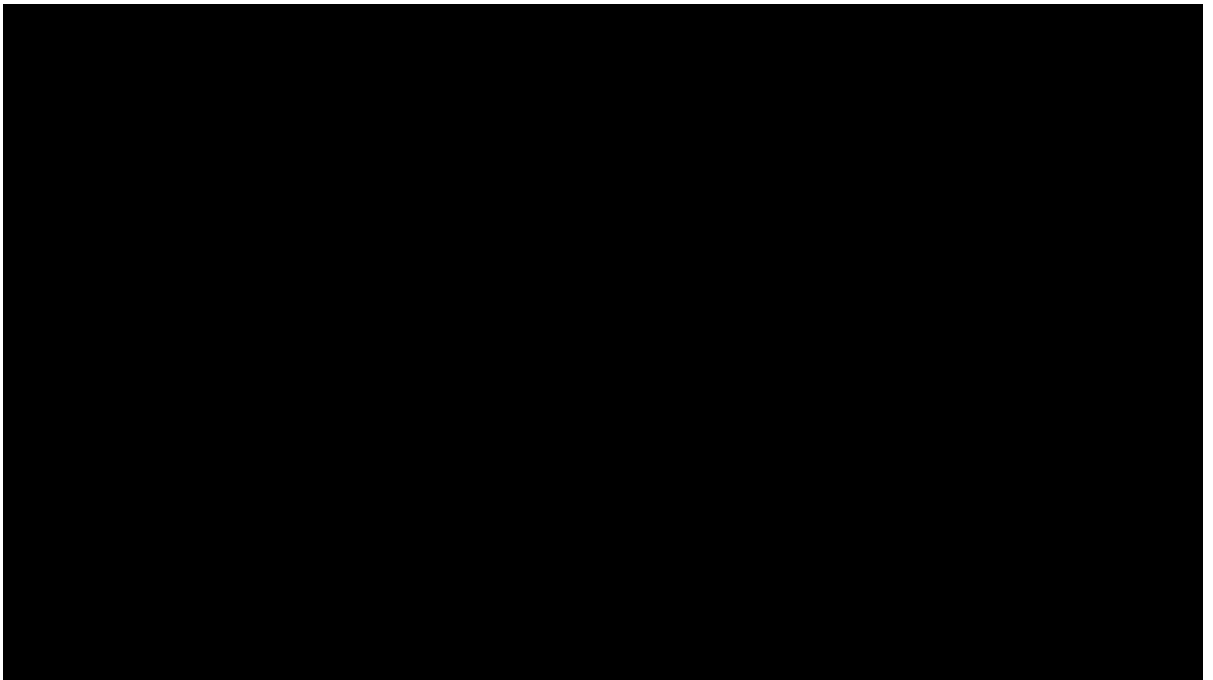


Figure 5: Screenshot of Meerkat Manor introduction sequence

Flower is the main character in MM through seasons 1-3 and her characterisation is consistent throughout the series. This is due to the story being constructed around Flower as a leader who keeps the group together through many internal and external conflicts. Flower is already the leader of the group at the start of season 1, and she is portrayed as a strong leader and noble mother who can be strict when it comes to protecting the integrity of the Whiskers family. Flower evicts her own daughters, and this is narrated as her being a strict leader who does what needs to be done to maintain the group's integrity and her own position. This even extends, in Season 2, to moving the family from the burrow when her daughter Mozart gives birth. This leaves Mozart and her pups by themselves and results in the pups being killed by a rival group, the Commandos. At the same time, Flower is also represented as a noble mother. This portrayal is prominent in Season 1 when Flower allows

Mozart's pups to remain with the Whiskers and raises them as her own, and in Season 3, when she adopts a pup of a rival group as her own.

Mozart, Flower's daughter, is also one of the key characters. She is represented as caring, and the narrative often highlights her being attentive to others. Thus when her brother Shakespeare is bitten by a snake, the narrator tells us that Mozart stays close to Shakespeare to look after him. She is the only one who stays with injured Shakespeare when everyone else goes out foraging. The shot shows injured Shakespeare and Mozart sitting nearby. The narrative represents Mozart as someone compassionate who would sacrifice herself to look after others. While Mozart is represented as a morally good character who always takes care of others even though her life is a full of misfortune, others are represented as morally bad such as her sister Kinkaju.

Kinkaju is portrayed as an ambitious and rebellious daughter of Flower. When both Mozart and Kinkaju are evicted, the narrator tells us that Mozart is patiently waiting to re-join the group and trying to get into Flower's good books while Kinkaju is ambitiously awaiting the moment she can take over the Whiskers and replace Flower as leader. Although both Mozart and Kinkaju are evicted, and mostly just hang around the Whiskers waiting to get back into the group, Mozart is narrated as patient while Kinkaju is portrayed as sly and ambitious. When she is in the Starsky group, which Mozart leads, the narrative depicts her as challenging Mozart and eventually killing Mozart's pups and taking over leadership of the group. Although Flower also engages in the killing of other females' pups in order to defend her position, she is portrayed as a strong leader while Kinkaju is narrated as a morally dubious character who puts herself first and does not hesitate to sacrifice other characters' lives for her own ends. These characteristics and the multiple story lines align with MM's closeness to soap opera where dramatic interactions between characters are highlighted. In addition, there is strong characterisation with some characters being more central to the plot than others, and the series focuses on female protagonists, underlining the value of strong, female leadership in meerkat groups.

The characterisation in MM both reproduces and challenges gender stereotypes. Flower is represented as a mother as well as a leader and many of her actions are described in relation to her motherhood. Her partner, Zaphod's, fatherhood is mentioned only in season

4, when he visits Flower's daughters' groups and chases off roving males; this is described as the act of a worried father. More generally the self-sacrifice of mothers is often praised in the narration while fatherhood is rarely mentioned. The narrative often represents female characters with stereotypically feminine traits; an example is Mozart who is described as a 'loving individual who takes care of everyone'. In contrast, Hannibal, the co-leader of one of the rival groups, the Commandos, is described as cold, brutal and militaristic, stereotypically masculine qualities. Sometimes, though, gender stereotypes and assumptions are challenged as in the character of Rocket Dog which I discuss in the next chapter.

5.2.2: OI characterisation

OI does not have an opening sequence introducing the characters as MM does (the opening sequence will be explained later in this chapter), which suggests that characterisation is less critical to the narrative. It is similar to MM, though, in so far as the narrative attributes a distinctive personality to each orangutan character. The personality traits identified in the narration differ from those in MM and are more appropriate to OI's coming-of-age story. The narrative represents the animal characters like young humans children who are still developing adult personalities, and as the story develops the orangutans become more independent of the humans who look after them. In season 1, Cha Cha is first represented as a depressed and anxious child, and the narrative highlights her heavy dependency on human company and affection. She struggles to get used to her new life on the island throughout season 1, but becomes more self-assured and makes friends towards the end of the season.

Hamlet's character also develops so that by the end of season 2 he has become the leader of the community. He originally enters the story in season 1 as an intruder to Orangutan Island; he is an older, more experienced male from neighbouring Palas Island. He is first represented as forceful and aggressive and tries to kidnap a female orangutan, Jasmine. He appears as a threat to the integrity of the community but later becomes the leader of the community. The narrative also represents the characters as moral actors. For instance, Reno is represented as 'bully' who uses his strength to intimidate others who are younger and physically weaker than him. Especially throughout season 1, Reno is represented as

mean and hostile, he attacks others and challenges the leader, Hamlet, whenever he gets a chance.

Some characters develop and change through the story. For instance, Mangis is an anti-social orangutan because she was spoiled by humans when living as an illegal pet when younger; she has a nickname of ‘spoiled princess’. She is constantly bullied by a group of female characters but eventually learns to stand up for herself and finds her place in the community. The narrative not only attributes personalities to the orangutans but also shows how they develop as they mature and learn to live in a group. Although the narrative structures of MM and OI differ, the way the characters are constructed and narrated, and their implied basis in the personalities of the animals involved, is similar for both programmes. However, in OI the characters are of equal importance, none is central to the story line, which focuses on different characters as the series progresses, and individual characters do not stand out in the way that they do in MM. In MM the characterisation is stronger than it is in OI and the story-line is character driven.

5.3: A sample episode from each programme

In this section, I analyse an episode from each programme. For MM, I chose Season 3 Episode 8, ‘Journey’s End’, as this is the most significant plot point in MM; it is the episode where Flower, the leader of the Whiskers, dies from a snake bite. As well as being significant in terms of plot, it attracted numerous audience comments. For OI, I chose Season 2 Episode 7, ‘We are Family’ because it is one of the key episodes in season 2 where the orangutans start to come together as a community. While season 1 focuses on the youngsters on Orangutan Island and their adjustments to their new way of life, season 2 focuses on the integration of orangutans from Orangutan Island and neighbouring Palas Island. This episode is near the end of season 2, when there is hope that the orangutans will live peacefully and benefit each other; it is a major plot point. This episode mainly focuses on two orangutans, Kiki and Mangis, and the story follows how they come to be a part of the community.

I focus on these two episodes because they epitomise the key concerns of the programmes. The MM episode focuses on Flower whose leadership has always been the focus of the

story, it highlights her significance to the cohesion of the Whiskers family. OI follows how orphaned orangutans learn to live together, and the example episode focuses on the near-achievement of this goal.

5.3.1: Meerkat Manor: ‘Journey’s End’

This episode is about Flower’s last moments as matriarch of the Whiskers. In the first half of the episode, there is a fight between the Whiskers and the Zappa, a rival group. Flower leads the Whiskers to victory even though the Zappa are led by a new, dominant pair which means the group is stronger and bigger than before. While retreating from the Whiskers, the Zappa leave one of their pups in the Whiskers’ territory. The pup, named Axel, is eventually adopted by the Whiskers. After a fight on their way back to their burrow, the Whiskers faced a cobra. They managed to chase it off but it sneaks into their burrow where the pups were. The Whiskers, led by Flower, fight with the cobra, and Flower, while defending her family, receives a fatal bite from the cobra and dies.

The episode starts with a scene where the camera captures a long shot of the landscape of the Kalahari Desert – a large plain with some trees and long grasses - setting the scene. The shot contains no human presence, suggesting that what we see is wild animals in their natural habitat without any human intervention. The narrator recaps the story so far while, in the background, music plays; the music accompanying the recap is always the same. During the recap, the camera cuts to Rocket Dog, showing a close up of her eyes, then it moves away to show her whole face. She is tilting her head towards the ground and looking far away, signifying her emotional state. The narrator says that in previous episodes, the Whiskers were separated into 2 groups: one with Flower leading it and the other a splinter group led by Rocket Dog. Rocket Dog lost her pups due to the stress of becoming leader of the splinter group. Her loss is emphasised by a shot of a newborn pup, her/his eyes still closed, helplessly moving her/his limbs on the ground under the sun. Viewers who have watched previous episodes know that the situation is not good for the pup because, at this age, they are defenceless and do not usually come out of the burrow. The narrator says that the two groups are now reunited and the camera cuts to many meerkats running around in a disorderly way which signifies the group’s confusion without Flower. The camera cuts to Flower who is standing tall and staring in one direction,

presumably towards her group, then the camera cuts to the group standing together, looking in the same direction, then shows them from a distance, together near a burrow entrance. These shots signify Flower's ability to organize and lead the group. This recap is significant in two ways: first, because it shows that MM takes the format of a typical serial drama which uses recaps, and, second, that the recap highlights MM's focus on the emotional and dramatic aspects of the narrative and Flower's importance as the matriarch of the group who holds them all together. The opening sequence introducing the main characters, described above, starts after the recap.

MM's focus on family and home is highlighted in the first sequence of the episode. Slow soft music starts in the background signifying that the mood is calm. There is a distant shot of a group of meerkats standing together facing the sun which is setting. The narrator says that the Whiskers have finished foraging and are returning to 'their home' and that some of the meerkats 'take time to unwind before going to bed'. This is an example of the way anthropomorphism is used in the narration to draw out similarities between meerkats and humans: the meerkats' burrows are often described as home and the description of meerkats sitting around the burrow just before sunset is described as unwinding before going to bed. Then the camera cuts to Flower's body and moves up to her head, she is looking into the distance, the narrator says that 'group leader Flower proudly sits with her extended family' referring to her emotional state and using the phrase, 'extended family', to describe a group of meerkats. The language the narrator uses represents the meerkats as a big family who share their burrow home.

This idea of family is reinforced in another sequence accompanied by light music which signals comedy. The narrator says that 'domestic duty has to be dealt with' and the camera cuts to a meerkat splashing sand up in the air; it then cuts to a group of meerkats digging their burrow entry and moving sand from the entrance. The camera keeps cutting to different meerkats digging and splashing sand. This signals a busy time of morning for the meerkats where they engage in a routine and regular activity that is often referred to as domestic work by the narrator; this highlights its resemblance to house work. The narrator informs us that 'not everyone is eager to pitch in with the group's chore' and the shot shows a meerkat digging sand, then pans out to show a few meerkats lying down near the burrow entrance getting covered in sand the others are digging. This contrast highlights a comical moment and differences in personality among the meerkats. By referring to this

activity as 'domestic duties' and 'a group chore', the narration emphasizes the family aspects of the meerkat group. Another example is the narrator saying, 'Once the housework is done, the group sets off to search for breakfast'. Searching for food happens constantly and meerkats spend most of their time foraging for food, but their eating behaviours are often referred to in terms of meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and snacks.

The attribution of morality to the animal characters is highlighted in the sequence focusing on Whiskers' rival group the Zappa. There is a long shot of the landscape of the Kalahari desert with sharp and dark music which is menacing and signals that something dangerous is about to happen. The narrator says that 'half a kilometre away, a rival gang are already out and up to no good'. The rival gang is the Zappa and the narration and music together signal that they are morally bad and dangerous. The camera cuts to several meerkats standing straight and keenly looking in one direction, presumably Zappa looking towards the Whiskers' territory. It then cuts to medium shots of two meerkats standing close together, first focussing on the one at the back then the one at the front. The narrator says that they are the Zappa who are led by 'handsome Houdini and feisty Punk' who are described as an 'ambitious pair'. This shows how the narrator attributes traits and characteristics to individual animal characters. The narrator then says that Houdini 'used to take liberties with Whiskers' ladies'; there is a value judgment implicit in this statement which highlights his predatory sexual behaviour. There is then a close up of Houdini's face with the narrator saying that he is 'turning his attention to taking Whiskers' land' thereby implying that he has expansionary ambitions. The shot cuts to an adult meerkat followed by three pups and the narrator explains that the pups are being taken 'for their first taste of plundered play' implying that they are crossing into Whiskers' territory. There is then a close up of one of the pup's faces followed by a long shot of an adult meerkat with the three pups innocently playing together. These shots and the narrations imply a moral judgment of the Zappa – they steal food and territory from the Whiskers and make their innocent pups party to their evil activities.

Throughout the episode, Flower's power is shown in various ways. She is pregnant and gives birth to pups in the first sequence of the episode which symbolises the Whiskers expansion in terms of numbers. Then in the sequence after the one featuring the Zappa, there is a shot of the Whiskers relaxing under a tree. The narrator says that the Whiskers are 'taking the day with a leisurely pace', food is plentiful at the moment, and the

Whiskers' large size gives the group security. There is then a close up of a meerkat sleeping followed by a shot of another meerkat in the medium distance who sits in a dug hole leaning against its edge taking a nap. This sequence highlights how powerful and strong the Whiskers have become under Flower's leadership as they have time to relax. They also have time to play. This is shown in the next sequence where two meerkats are play fighting; the shot stays focused on them and several other meerkats jump in and join the game. The narrator says that they are 'tangled up in the youngsters' games'. The shot cuts to Flower joining the play fight, showing her rolling around with the other meerkats and the narrator says that, 'although a boss can let her fur down once in a while, experience has taught her never to let down her gown', implying that she is a good leader. At this point tense, threatening background music starts. The camera cuts to show Flower walking up to the edge of a hill and standing upright. The narrator says that she has spotted the Zappa, and the camera cuts to a long shot of the plain with meerkats gathering and standing up facing in the same direction; the narration explains that they are the Whiskers: 'Quickly, the Whiskers gather together to form an impressive army'. Then there is a shot of another group of meerkats standing together all looking in the same direction, which the narrator says is the Zappa looking towards the Whiskers: 'Facing Flower for the first time since the Whiskers re-grouped, Punk and Houdini are looking a lot less confident'. This whole sequence shows how Flower has built a strong family group which can enjoy play and leisure time and whom their enemies fear; it also shows that she is a strong leader who is ready to fight if necessary.

Fights among meerkats are often described using militaristic language. For instance, after a fight sequence in this episode between the Whiskers and the Zappa, there is a medium shot of the Whiskers. The narrator says that they have won the battle and are scent marking the territory. In the narration, fights between meerkats are often referred to as battles and terms such as win and lose are used. Also, a meerkat going into another group's burrow is often referred to as a 'burrow raid' which is also militaristic. Using war-like terminology to represent conflicts heightens the drama.

As well as showing Flower as a strong leader, a later sequence shows Flower as a merciful, motherly figure. After the fight between the Zappa and the Whiskers which the Zappa lose, one of the Zappa's pups Axel is abandoned in open ground. A shot shows Axel moving around aimlessly while the narrator says that he does not know how to get back home.

There is a shot of a cobra, that focuses on the cobra's head and, although Axel and the cobra are not in the same frame, this signals that Axel is in danger and the narrator says that the cobra is 'sizing him up'. The shot returns to Axel, with a long shot of him sitting in open ground, alone, highlighting how vulnerable he is. The background music is dark and intense, reinforcing his vulnerability and the danger he is in. Meanwhile, there is another close up of Axel, then the cobra, then Axel before a shot of an eagle in the sky; these shots, in combination with the music and the narration, emphasise how vulnerable Axel is.

After this sequence, Mitch, one of the Whiskers, finds Axel and brings him back to the Whiskers and the narrator says that Axel is thrown into 'a lion's den'. The shot cuts to Mitch carrying Axel in his mouth, with several other meerkats around them, presumably members of the Whiskers. Mitch stops in front of Flower and drops Axel. The camera stays in the same place with Flower in shot, facing Axel. Flower picks up Axel then drops him and the narrator says that Axel's life has been spared. We see a close up of Axel's face highlighting the emotional situation for Axel while the narrator says that meerkats usually do not adopt other group's pups and that this shows how 'noble' Flower is. Later in the episode, there is a shot of Flower carrying Axel and helping him back to the Whiskers' burrow, which emphasises Flower's caring nature and how she is looking after Axel even though he is not her own pup. The first part of this sequence focuses on Axel highlighting his desperate situation through the music, the narration and the filming, the latter part highlights Flower's caring nature and her nobility, mainly through the narration and Flower's actions; the sequence taken together signifies Flower as a morally good and honourable character.

This whole narrative about Flower as a strong and noble leader is the build up to the final sequence which starts with a shot of the Whiskers returning home. Intense background music begins again. The narrator warns that 'a terrifying surprise waits for them', and the camera cuts to a cape cobra. The narrator says that a cape cobra is venomous and known to eat meerkat pups. After a few sequences, the narrator says that the cobra is invading the Whiskers' burrow where Flower's newborn pups are. The camera cuts to the burrow entrance where many meerkats are peeking in, Flower goes through them to go into the burrow. The narrator says that Flower 'courageously follows' the cobra while the in-burrow camera shows Flower inside the burrow by herself.

There is then a dramatic and emotional sequence. The screen blacks out for a few seconds then fades into long shots of the Kalahari Desert with the sound of birds chirping; it blacks out again, and the image of the sky fades in before it blacks out again, cutting to a long shot of a different part of the Kalahari Desert where there are trees. Slow, calm piano music begins. This sequence conveys the sense that the camera is looking for Flower but cannot find her and signals that something has happened to Flower. The screen blacks out again and a shot of Flower from behind appears, she is struggling to walk. The narrator says that she has received a fatal bite on her head, there is another black out then a shot of Flower with an injury on her head, walking out of the frame away from the camera. The screen blacks out again before showing Flower lying in front of the burrow entrance. The camera slowly moves away from her, then upwards, leaving Flower outside the frame, and shows another long shot of the Kalahari Desert. The narrator says, 'For four years, Flower was the Whiskers' faithful dominant'. There is then a flashback to Flower when she was still alive. The narrator says, 'From humble beginnings, she created one of the largest, close-knit families of the Manor.' The camera cuts to Flower sitting with other meerkats near a burrow entrance surrounded by yellow flowers while the narrator says, 'Flower was a formidable leader' and the camera cuts to Flower leading the group who are all running in one direction. The narrator continues, 'and a noble mother' and the shot cuts to Flower with a pup. The narrator continues, 'The desert lost its favourite rose' at which point the shot cuts to a close up of Flower's face where it lingers for a few seconds. The next shot is of a group of meerkats without Flower, the camera moves upwards and there is a long shot, seemingly from the sky, of the meerkats on the ground, a shot from Flower's perspective, leaving her family and moving slowly away from them. The narrator says, 'Flower died defending her pups. The measure of a leader is not determined by a single act. It is their lasting legacy that truly matters'. This final sequence not only shows that Flower is dead but also highlights her significance in the series and for the Whiskers. The camera cuts and blacks out often, showing long shots of the Kalahari Desert to signify that Flower was the greatest leader in the Kalahari, and images of her when she was still alive convey what a great leader and mother she was. This editing, combined with the narration and music, highlights the emotional aspects of the death of Flower.

This analysis shows how narration, music and editing work together to convey the mood of the different sequences and the emotions of individual meerkat characters. Together they contribute to an emotional and dramatic human-interest story focussing on the central

character, Flower. The narrative structure of OI differs from that of MM and I explore this in the next section.

5.3.2: Orangutan Island: ‘We are Family’

The episode of OI that I analyse is about a female orangutan called Kiki, who, with her male baby, Hardi, comes to Orangutan Island from neighbouring Palas Island to join the orangutan community. Kiki is at first a little wary of the younger orangutans, but eventually learns that they are just curious and willing to help her with Hardi.

This episode also focuses on a female orangutan named Mangis, who I introduced above, and her adaptation to the community.

The episode starts with a recap like MM and other TV serials. The narrator explains that Kiki, an older female orangutan with a baby called Hardi, has been relocated from Palas Island to Orangutan Island. There is a shot of Kiki walking on the ground with Hardi on her back then a close up of Hardi, facing straight at the camera. The narrator says that a male orangutan called Jordan was the first to take an interest in the baby and the shot cuts to Jordan walking up to Kiki and trying to touch Hardi; Kiki ignores him and keeps walking. The narrator mentions that Alibaba is also interested in Hardi and the shot cuts to Hardi swinging in a tree on the left of the screen with Alibaba reaching out from a tree on the right and trying to grab him. The narrator explains that what Alibaba actually wants is Kiki’s attention and the shot cuts to Kiki and Alibaba sitting together; it shows a close up of Alibaba’s head which is very near Kiki’s. The next shot features Jordan and Mangis with the narrator saying that the two outcasts of the island, Jordan and Mangis, are ‘developing a relationship’. There is then a shot of two orangutans close together, one sitting down and one standing, followed by a close up of Jordan’s and Mangis’ faces. As there is a convention of close up shots being used to convey emotion this signifies their emotional closeness which is emphasised by a shot of Mangis cleaning Jordan’s ear with her finger. Their behaviour is referred to as ‘being in a relationship’. This description betrays the heteronormativity implicit in the narration as the phrase ‘being in a relationship’ is never applied to orangutans of the same gender interacting in this way. The narrator concludes the recap by pointing out the focus of this episode: ‘Now, can a baby change the dynamics of this remarkable society?’, the camera cuts to Hardi swinging from

a tree, then to his mother, Kiki. This opening sequence highlights this episode's focus on interactions among particular characters, especially the dynamics of their inter-personal relationships and how a baby can affect them. It also highlights that each orangutan has a different name and personality and locates them socially with Jordan and Mangis, for instance, being named as outcasts.

Flashbacks and talk-to-camera sequences are often used in OI. In comparison, MM's only use of flashbacks is in the sequence surrounding Flower's death where the purpose is to memorialise her. In OI, talk-to-camera sequences are used to provide an opportunity for Lone, the project leader, to explain animals' behaviours or give relevant information, while flashbacks are used to replay earlier parts of the story that are connected to what is currently happening. In this episode talk-to-camera sequences and flashbacks are used. For instance, there is a sequence where Jasmine is suffering from a rash. It opens with a close-up of Cha Cha's face, the sound of another orangutan crying in distress, and the narrator saying that Cha Cha is 'distracted by the sound of distress' from Jasmine. The shot cuts to Jasmine lying on the ground and Cha Cha sitting next to her and then to Jasmine's skin which has come out in a blistering rash. The narrator explains that this is due to the poison ivy on the island, there is a shot of a big tree and the black sap on its surface, and the narrator says that even the project leader, Lone, has experienced the rash. The next shot is of Lone, looking directly at the camera, on the bottom left of the screen, Lone's full name and job title appear and Lone explains that the rash is caused by touching the tree sap. An example of the use of flashback is a sequence featuring Saturnus and Cha Cha. The opening shot shows Saturnus playing with a large leaf while the narrator explains that he has 'his own way of attracting the opposite sex'.

We then see Saturnus putting the leaf on his head and the narrator wonders if this will attract Cha Cha's attention. There is a close up shot of Cha Cha, then one of Saturnus and then another of Cha Cha. The shot fades quickly, and a flashback starts. There is different, light background music playing which signals that it is indeed a flashback. There is a long shot of Cha Cha and Saturnus playing together in a puddle, getting all muddy. This shot fades quickly which signals the end of the flash back, and the music changes. These examples of flashback and talk-to-camera sequence show how that they are used to provide information about orangutans and to tell the back stories of the characters. These are techniques found in many other TV genres.

In this episode, there is a repeated emphasis on a mother as carer and her love for her child. For instance, in a sequence where Kiki is taking care of Hardi there is a long shot of her in a tree and Hardi hanging from a branch higher up. The narrator says that Kiki's focus is on Hardi, and that this maternal behaviour is shared with macaque monkeys who also live on the island. The shot cuts to a macaque monkey holding her baby, and then to the baby macaque, before panning out to show the mother grooming her baby; the narrator says that mother macaque monkeys keep a close eye on their babies. This sequence highlights the mothering skills that orangutans and macaques share and implies that such skills are important. In the context of this episode this is significant as the young orangutans are learning how to interact with baby Hardi.

Later, a sequence shows Togar trying to play with Hardi. The shot cuts to Togar in a tree, and follows him moving through the trees. Then there is a long shot of Kiki on the right hand side of the frame pulling Togar's leg, then a close-up of Hardi. The narrator says that Hardi is anxious although the shot itself does not reveal his emotions; this indicates how important the narrator is for the interpretation of the characters' emotional states. The shot cuts to Kiki and Togar fighting in the tree and the narrator explains that 'Togar wrestles Kiki trying to overpower her strong maternal instinct, but then backs off realising he is no match for a mother determined to protect her baby'. Again, Kiki's wrestling with Togar is explained through maternal instinct although the shot does not reveal where Hardi is. The mother protecting her baby is repeatedly emphasized in this episode, and highlights the focus of the narration on the mother's role; there is no discussion of fathers.

Hetero-normativity is also repeatedly reproduced in the narration at 2 points, in the recap (see above) and in the following sequence which focuses on Saturnus. There is a long shot of the jungle from high up, looking down to the ground and panning from left to right. The narrator says that it is the next morning and that 'Saturnus's romantic interlude with Cha Cha appeared to be short-lived.' The shot cuts to Cha Cha on the feeding station with Hardi. The narrator says that Cha Cha is now focusing on Hardi, and that, 'This is the second time Saturnus has been dumped in favour of baby Hardi'. The shot cuts to Saturnus, showing him bouncing on a tree branch as if in frustration at having been dumped, then there is a long shot of the jungle with Saturnus in the centre of the frame walking away from the camera. This sequence shows not only how the narration constructs

romantic relationships between male and female characters but also conveys the ideas that, for female orangutans, the appeal of babies is stronger than the appeal of males and that Cha Cha is learning how to be maternal.

Anthropomorphism is also evident in OI. In one sequence, for instance, the scene starts with a shot of the feeding platform, Hardi is in the middle of the frame and another orangutan on the right. The camera follows Hardi, showing an orangutan on the left who turns out to be Kiki. The narrator says that rejuvenated Kiki is relaxed and calm, and the shot cuts to her eating fruit, and then to a close up of Hardi eating fruit surrounded by other orangutans. The narrator says that Kiki is watching Hardi 'learning table manners from his babysitters', an anthropomorphic phrase that is used to describe orangutans eating fruit together on the feeding platform. The sequence where Daisy is taking care of Hardi is another example of how OI uses anthropomorphism to emphasise similarities between orangutans' behaviour and that of humans. There is a long shot of Daisy lying beside Hardi, it then moves to a close-up of Daisy's face, centre frame, with Hardi resting his head on her face. The shot becomes a close up of Hardi. The narrator says that Daisy's reward for taking care of Hardi is holding his hand and the shot moves down to focus on Daisy holding Hardi's hand. This sequence represents holding hands as a sign of affection and closeness for orangutans as is the case for humans. Throughout the series, there are a lot of physical interactions between the orangutans, including pulling each other's hands, but this is the only time when holding hands is taken as a sign of affection.

OI also often emphasizes how the orangutans teach each other skills and this is one of the key purposes of the rehabilitation programme. For example, in one sequence, there is a shot of Kiki lying on the ground with Hardi. The narrator says that she 'finally takes a break', but Hardi is not sleepy. The shot cuts to a close up of Hardi's face and then to Kiki lying on the ground and Hardi climbing on her and playing with her fur. There is then a more distant shot with an orangutan sitting to the right of the frame, next to Kiki. The shot cuts to this orangutan, and the narrator says that it is Daisy, 'famous for scrapping with everyone and anyone'. We then see Kiki still on the ground and Daisy playing with Hardi followed by a close-up of Kiki's face; the narrator says that Kiki is allowing Daisy and Hardi to play. The frame now shows Kiki, with Hardi and Daisy playing together. These three orangutans are kept in shot, Daisy lightly punches Hardi, and Kiki rolls over to intervene by holding Hardi. The narrator explains that when Daisy gets too rough with

Hardi, 'Kiki reinforces the rules and Daisy tries again'. This sequence highlights the community and school aspects of the story in so far as young orangutans are learning the skills needed to interact safely with a baby.

Another scene also draws on the school analogy which the narrator refers to explicitly in terms of bullying at school. In the sequence the camera follows Mangis walking towards the feeding platform, she goes up the ladder to get to the food, but Cha Cha pushes her away. There is intense music in the background. The shot follows Mangis as she moves away then cuts to a close up of Cha Cha's face, presumably watching Mangis. The narrator says that Mangis is learning and is trying to sneak back to the feeding platform. The shot cuts to Mangis and follows her moving towards the feeding platform; there is a shot of her sitting next to Bertha and then a long shot of Cha Cha who moves towards Mangis, grabs her and tries to get her off the feeding platform. Later, the shot returns to Mangis who is now a few meters away from the feeding platform; the narrator says that she has had enough of being pushed off it. The camera then follows Mangis climbing up to the platform again and Cha Cha pushing her off but this time, says the narrator, Mangis is not intimidated; there is then a shot of her taking food from the platform with the narrator saying that 'the outcast finally claims her place'. Then Mangis is shown stepping up onto the platform; she is on the right side of the frame, in the centre is Hardi who is touching her and the narrator says that Mangis receives a special welcome from Hardi. Light calm music begins. We then see Papau attacking Cha Cha which is explained as Papau standing up for Mangis. The narrator concludes the sequence by saying 'Mangis is now one of the family'. This last scene especially highlights the coming of age story-line of OI – from being intimidated and anti- social, Mangis overcomes her fear to stand up for herself and become part of the community. It also shows Hardi, the baby, bringing her into the family, as in the episode's title.

OI's focus throughout is on community. The narrative repeatedly stresses the sense of community among the orangutans and the strong bonds they create. Papau's attack on Cha Cha is explained in terms of 'standing up for Mangis' although it looks like any other fight between orangutans. Also, the orangutans are sometimes referred to as 'classmates'; this is partly because they grew up together in 'the forest school' but also they are attributed with school student like qualities such as being a bully, mischievous or the clown of the class.

There are breaks for advertisements in the US versions of OI and MM (which are the ones I watched) which usually interrupt the text at a moment of drama. In this episode of OI, there were shots of Kiki and Hardi on a tree with the narrator explaining that they are taking refuge from Togar who is trying to get close to Hardi. There is a shot of Hardi swinging from a branch, then one of Kiki looking upwards, presumably towards Hardi, and the narrator explains that Hardi is climbing up high while Kiki watches over him. There is another shot of Hardi climbing a tree, the narrator says that Kacio is in the same tree as Hardi and the shot cuts to Kacio. There is a close-up shot of Kiki's face implying anxiety about what might happen, then the ad break begins. This is signalled with the logo of OI appearing on the screen and a song. After the break, the logo appears again with the theme song and the narrator reminds the viewers where the story ended before the break by saying that Kiki is exhausted, Daisy is babysitting Hardi, and Kacio is getting close to Hardi.

This analysis shows differences between the two programmes in their narrative structure, characterisation, the use of drama, and the presence or absence of humans. First, MM has a continuous story line which focuses on Flower and it is her character that drives the story. Alongside this there are stories featuring other characters but Flower remains central to the narrative; indeed, with her death not only do the Whiskers fall apart with the loss of their matriarchal leader, but the programme also loses the character that is holding it together. In contrast, OI does not focus on one main character, it is episodic, with different characters featuring in different episodes. Having said that, the narratives in both programmes can be seen as human-interest stories, focussing on individual characters and the experiences that affect them personally; I explore this in more detail in the next chapter. There are also differences in the use of dramatization with MM using it more than OI. This is evident in the scene where Flower dies where the music, the images and the narration all combine to present a dramatic and emotional sequence: the music conveys a sense of heightened emotions, sadness and grief, the narration talks about the significance of Flower's loss, and the images and editing highlight how important Flower was to not only the Whiskers but to the Kalahari desert. In contrast, while OI follows the stories of individual orangutans, it contains more information about how animals live in the wild. This is conveyed in the use of flashbacks to the project leader who explains orangutans' behaviour, and in the narration where information about different animals is imparted. A significant difference is the

amount of human involvement on screen. In MM, there is no human presence in the story, the animals are represented as living in the wild with no human contact at all; this constructs a reality where ‘nature’ and the ‘wild’ are separate from the human. In OI, humans frequently appear to help the animals and the impact of human activities on wild animals is central to the programme; a different reality is constructed where humans and animals interact rather than belonging to different realms. The humans in OI provide the orangutans with food, take them to the vet when they are injured or ill and install certain artefacts, such as feeding platforms, to encourage them to develop cooperative behaviour. In MM humans do not appear, even though, off camera, the scientists intervene in the meerkats’ lives; they relate to them as objects of scientific research, they weigh them and sometimes euthanize them in order to prevent the spread of disease. This different reality, where humans and meerkats interact, is constructed on the website linked to the programme but not in the programme itself.

5.3.3: Are they both wildlife docu-soaps?

My discussion so far shows that MM and OI have different storylines, narrative structures and settings. While MM focuses on the rise and fall of a powerful family, OI tells a coming-of-age story about integration into an adult community. OI has a human presence while in MM there are no humans; the realities the programmes construct are different in relation to nature, wildlife and human-animal relations.

Finally, MM is linked to a scientific research project and shows the social life of meerkat groups in a soap opera format, while OI’s story is based on a rehabilitation centre, it shares features with reality TV, and contains a strong conservation message.

Although there are some differences between OI and MM, I argue that both of them can be categorized as wildlife docu-soaps for the following reasons. Firstly, both programmes focus on interactions between the animal characters: MM tells the story of Flower and her powerful family with their internal and external struggles, and OI tells the story of orphaned orangutans who are moved to an island in order to build a community and cooperate with each other for survival. MM’s narrative develops throughout the series and is character-driven while OI’s is episodic, focussing on different characters in different episodes. In MM we follow the Whisker family as it becomes the biggest group in the

‘Manor’ and then watch it fall apart after the death of its leader. OI focuses more on incidents happening among the characters rather than having a character-driven narrative; it does, however, develop through the series with the young orangutans learning the skills needed to live together and building a community. I would argue that MM shares many of its features with soap opera, such as its focus on female characters, family and dramas among family members, while OI shares features with reality TV, especially in the way a group of individuals is left together in a particular place, with some intervention from those who are making the programme.

Secondly, both are structured around human-interest stories and rely on anthropomorphised and individualised animal characters. In both programmes, each character has a name and distinct personality which are explained in the narration and their behaviours are often described as analogous to human social behaviour.

Thus, orangutans eating food together is described as ‘learning table manners’, and meerkats digging sand from the burrow entrance are referred to as doing ‘housework’. This use of anthropomorphism serves to emphasise similarities between the social behaviours of the animal characters and human social behaviour. Both programmes focus on dramatized interactions between animal characters to construct human-interest stories; examples include the ‘illicit’ pregnancies of rebellious daughters in MM and boys in a class room fighting to show who is the strongest in OI.

Thirdly, both are categorized as wildlife documentaries while they also incorporate aspects of other genres. Animal Planet lists both programmes as wildlife documentaries, as do IMDb and TV.com⁴, but it is clear from the main story-lines that the programmes share features with other TV genres including their episodic structure, and their continuous or episodic story-lines which are typical of soap opera and reality TV respectively. Indeed, DeMello (2012) comments that the narrative of MM represents animals ‘as if they are living a soap opera’ (p. 335) and points out that OI has a similar narrative. Moreover, MM’s focus on family and OI’s focus on community are also commonly found in soap opera and reality TV (Brown, 1994).

⁴ TV.com listed the two programmes under ‘documentary’ and ‘science’ categories with ‘animals’ and ‘pet & nature’ theme tags. IMDb categorized both programmes under ‘documentary’.

However, it should be noted that MM and OI blend the elements of various genres differently. While MM has more similarities to soap opera with characters who have established backstories and develop throughout the series, OI shares more with reality TV with orangutans moving into an artificial environment in a similar way to reality TV shows like *Big Brother* and *Love Island*. Although both programmes share aspects of soap opera and reality TV, each programme has a different balance of them and this influences the programme's focus and representations of animals. MM is more character driven which makes the story more compelling than that of OI, while OI focuses on a setup like *Big Brother* where unrelated orangutans are thrown together and have to learn to cooperate. This different balance may be associated with different audience responses with MM's characters and narrative structure attracting a more emotional response than OI; this is something I explore in subsequent chapters.

5.4: Overview of production/distribution

This section presents an overview of the production of MM and OI, which differ significantly, and provides further information about the programmes, such as the length of each episode and seasons. This provides a context for the programmes and is relevant for my analysis chapters as it raises the question of whether the length of a series affects audiences' emotional responses to animal characters. This section also provides key information such as the role of scientific advisors; both MM and OI are advertised by Animal Planet as documentaries, and both convey information about the animals and their environments.

MM is produced in the UK and OI in the US by different production companies but both are broadcast by Animal Planet. *Meerkat Manor* is produced by Oxford Scientific Films⁵ and broadcast by Animal Planet International between 2005 and 2008. The show has 4 seasons and in total 53 episodes with each episode lasting approximately 24 minutes. The programme is based on the Kalahari Meerkat Project funded by Cambridge University to study the cooperative behaviours of meerkats and one of the drivers behind MM is the

⁵ Oxford Scientific Film is a TV and film production company that produces documentary and natural history programmes. It is based in Oxford UK.

popularization of scientific insights into animal behaviour. There is a considerable amount of para-textual material associated with MM. The research it draws on has a website called Friends of the Kalahari Meerkats Project, and aims to provide information about meerkats and the research as well as collect donations. In exchange for an annual fee, the website offers information about the meerkats and MM such as: detailed profiles of each character, the names of meerkats participating in the research and the TV programme, and an episode guides. There is also a range of MM merchandise for sale. One of the researchers, Professor Tim Clutton-Brock (2010), published a book called *Meerkat Manor: The story of Flower of the Kalahari*. Animal Planet also has an official website for MM and Oxford Scientific Films produced a film called ‘Meerkat Manor: The story begins’ which is a prequel to MM.

Orangutan Island (OI) is produced by NHNZ⁶ and was broadcast by Animal Planet International between 2007 and 2009. It has 2 seasons and 26 episodes of 30 minutes each. The programme follows a group of rescued orangutans in the Nyaru Menteng Orangutan Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, and it often shows the project leader Lone Drøsch Nielsen and the work the rehabilitation centre does. As such, the focus of the programme is raising awareness of the situation orangutans are in due to the illegal pet trade and deforestation – and those topics are often integrated into the story. Anne Russon, a researcher on primate intelligence, is a scientific advisor for the series. Although OI does not have merchandise (OI only has an official Animal Planet web page), NHNZ made a programme called Orangutan Jungle School in 2018 which focuses on orphaned orangutans in the same rehabilitation centre.

5.4.1: Cultural variations

For both programmes, I look at audience responses written in English, but because MM and OI are broadcast in different countries and are adapted to the different cultural contexts, audiences might have seen different versions of the programmes depending on where they live or which version they have access to. Indeed, it is important to take into consideration how the programmes were changed for US broadcasting and, in the case of

⁶ NHNZ (previously Natural History New Zealand) is a TV production company producing natural history programmes.

MM, for broadcasting in more than 160 different countries⁷. For MM, I found that there is not a lot of difference between the British and US versions but the differences that there are relate to the use of British or US English (British/American English), and the narrator. I watched both the UK and US versions of Season 3 Episode 8, Journey's End, and found that the narration is identical, the only difference being the identity of the narrator and there are other minor differences – such as changes in title and character names.

The differences between narrators may be more significant. Different narrators have different ways of telling a story such as tone of voice and pitch, and these may impact on audience responses. In my analysis of audience responses, however, I only found a few comments on the narrators, so the impact of the narrators is not a focus of my research.

The narrators for MM are all men. They are:

- Bill Nighy (UK/Canada)
- Mike Goldman (Australia)
- Sean Austin (US, Season 1-3)
- Stockard Channing (US, Season 4)

Although the narrators are different, the UK and US versions have almost identical content. The main differences are that the US versions are edited to have more ad breaks, and that scenes including meerkats mating are omitted from the US version, while they are included in the UK and Australian versions. While this does not affect the story-line, it says something about what the distributors think is acceptable to a US audience.

Some characters have different names in the UK and US versions. Mozart and Kinkaju's sister, De La Soul (UK) is changed to Whoopi (US) as a tribute to the US actress Whoopi Goldberg. This is because Goldberg narrated the film franchise of MM, Meerkat Manor: The Story begins, (2008) and is also a celebrity fan of MM. Also, the Whiskers' pups in

⁷ Many other versions, such as Japanese version, are dubbed, but in this thesis, I focused on the UK and US narration.

season 3 are Ren and Stumpy in the UK version, and Len and Squiggy in the US version; this meant that the title of season 3 episode 5 is *The Tale of Ren and Stumpy* in the UK and *The Tale of Len and Squiggy* in the US. Even when characters' names are changed it is clear who they refer to and, if someone posts about a character using the name in the British version in the YouTube comment section, others who watch the American version understand who they are referring to because they know the story.

Some episodes have different titles, in addition to the one just mentioned. For instance, season 3 episode 3 is called '*Something's Got to Give*' in the UK version but '*Sister Act*' in the US version; this is another tribute to Whoopi Goldberg. The title of season 2 episode 13 is '*The Killing Fields*' (UK) and '*The Quiet Fields*' (US) and season 3 episode 6 title is '*The House of Zappa*' (UK) and '*Sibling Rivalry*' (US). There are some more minor changes such as British and American spelling differences such as *Neighbour* (UK) and *Neighbor* (US).

For OI, the narrator is Rodd Houston. The programme was made in the US, and there was no UK version. The names of the orangutans in OI were the same as their names in the rehabilitation centre.

5.5: Conclusions

This chapter has analysed an episode each of MM and OI presented relevant contextual information about the programmes, such as the main characters, plot lines and production details.

I have shown that both MM and OI are based on individualised animal characters who have their own names and traits. They also share features with genres such as soap opera and reality TV including dramatic, human-interest story lines that continue from episode to episode and from one season to another. The analysis of the two episodes from the programmes showed how the animal characters are represented through the narration and how the music, editing and narration together convey mood and emotion. It showed that the animal characters are represented as moral agents and that anthropomorphism and individualisation work to emphasise similarities between humans and the animals who are

central to the stories. It also showed that MM and OI have different narrative structures with MM being character driven and having a strong plot while OI which is episodic and open in its story line. There is evidence that assumptions about gender and heteronormativity influence the way the animal characters are represented; this is taken up in the next chapter where I explore audience responses. The next three analysis chapters focus on audience responses where the themes identified in this chapter are also important. In the next chapter I discuss audience responses to narrative and human-interest stories in wildlife docu-soaps.

Chapter 6: Audience response to narratives in wildlife docu-soaps

In the previous chapter I provided an analysis of episodes of *Meerkat Manor* and *Orangutan Island*, exploring how they are structured and how the animals are represented, both visually and through the narration and music. This chapter explores audience responses to these representations, focussing particularly on responses to narrative. As we have seen, wildlife docu-soaps are a hybrid TV genre; they are part wildlife documentary while also sharing aspects with other genres such as soap opera and reality TV. They dramatize and emotionalize animals' lives and, as I will argue in this chapter, the stories of individual animals that they narrate can be understood as human-interest stories⁸. My analysis of audience responses will show that these human-interest stories engage audiences and that audience responses relate to the narratives, though not in a deterministic way. Thus, certain representations of the animal characters are reproduced in audience responses while others are contested.

For instance, viewers judge the morality of animals on the basis of how they are described by the narrator and how their actions are represented as the story develops but, at the same time, some audience members take issue with what they see as anthropomorphic interpretations of animal behaviours and the attribution of moral responsibility to them. Similarly, animals in the programmes, as well as predators and humans, are loved or hated depending on how the story unfolds and their individual behaviour. This suggests that the narrative has a significant impact on audience responses to the animals. Audiences can, however, read texts in different ways. Hall (1980), for instance, suggests that audiences decode messages based on their social contexts, while Morley (1980) shows that readings of television programmes vary with race, gender and social class. Having said that it is important to note that this does not mean there is an infinite number of possible readings.

⁸ In the previous chapter (Chapter 3) I defined human-interest story as one that holds the interest of audiences. Human-interest stories can feature animals and are told in a way that emphasises the personal and individual aspects of a story, so creating an interest in it that is particular. The term can therefore be useful in understanding the way wildlife docu-soap narratives are structured.

Audiences are likely to read texts in particular ways and, in what follows, I discuss audience responses to the narratives and storyline and to the programmes' hybrid genre character. First, however I explore the idea of human-interest stories and whether it is helpful in analysing audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps.

6.1: Human-interest Stories

As we saw in Chapter 2, 'A human interest frame puts a human face and emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem' (Cho & Gower, 2006, p. 420); it does this by using dramatization, personalization and emotionalization (Steimel, 2010) and, in the case of wildlife docu-soaps, 'ordinary' (Crist, 2000) language which makes the animal characters appear 'almost human' (this was discussed in Chapter 3). These elements are found in wildlife docu-soaps and, despite the concept being defined in terms of 'human' interest and putting a 'human face' to a story, I find it useful in so far as it indicates a type of story that attracts and holds the interest of an audience in a particular way and is structured around individual characters. MM and IO are similarly structured around individual animal characters and their dramatic life events and struggles, including conflicts, romances and deaths.

The connection between human-interest stories and audience responses is widely documented in the literature. Cho and Gower (2006), for instance find that human-interest stories elicit emotional responses such as sympathy (see also Chapter 3). By representing animals' lives in terms of individual, dramatic and emotional incidents, audiences are led to focus on and react to such aspects. For instance, the narration in the episode of MM where Flower dies is emotional and, as I will show, elicits a large number of emotional responses from audiences. Comments on the drama in the storylines and how compelling it is can be seen in these audience reviews.

"Each season had 13 episodes that always have some type of drama going on"
(IMDb)

"You get hooked on the real life drama of these intriguing meerkats" (IMDb)

These extracts are typical of reviews. The way they are written indicates that the writers are addressing themselves to someone who has not watched the programmes and is aiming to make them sound attractive. They demonstrate that the writers perceive the dramatic aspects of the programmes as something that draws audiences in. The second review which talks about getting ‘hooked on the real life drama’ is especially clear about this effect. The dramatic aspects of the programmes is commented on by others:

“Although it has its good fight scenes and family affairs, sometimes it drags on for a whole episode which kind of gets boring, but soon enough, another twist sends you back to the edge of your seat” (TV.com)

“It's like the perfect real life drama. They may not speak any words but that doesn't stop the show from being entertaining” (TV.com)

This attention to the dramatic and emotional aspects of the stories is also evident in audience responses to human-interest stories and supports my use of the concept to understand the structure of the programmes and audience responses (see Chapter 3). Indeed, DeMello (2012) comments on how Meerkat Manor focuses on the dramatic aspects of animals’ lives such as fights and romances. These audience responses also illustrate that the dramatic structure of the stories is recognised as functioning to keep their attention. These dramatic story-lines share elements with soap operas (Fluton et al, 2006) and reality TV shows (Hill, 2005), such as romantic affairs and family conflicts, and audience responses indicate that these elements are perceived as a significant part of the wildlife docu-soaps. This suggests that audience members respond to wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre which, on the one hand, creates drama out of the lives of animals but, on the other hand, provides an insight into how animals live their lives. I discuss this further in Chapter 8.

Similarly, there were frequent comments in the reviews about the way the personal and emotional aspects of stories caught viewers’ interest. One reviewer wrote of MM that it is:

“A show that will put you in to tears, make you extremely happy and can take your breath away. The cutest family in the Kalahari makes a great story of love, hate, revenge, anger, happiness, death, life, terror, and suffering. Everything it takes to make a great show” (TV.com)

This review refers to the emotional aspects of the programmes which engender emotional responses from the audience and make them entertaining. It emphasises their personal, emotional and dramatic aspects. This type of response again reinforces the usefulness of understanding the stories as human-interest stories which highlight the dramatic and emotional aspects of individual animals’ lives and elicit emotional responses on the part of the audience. The audience responds to the dramatic events of the meerkats’ lives and understands them in terms of emotions that they themselves would feel. They are affected by the emotional ups and downs of the animals’ lives. The emotion-eliciting effect of human-interest stories has been pointed out by others (Cho & Gower, 2006; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Scott, 2010) and demonstrates why the concept of human-interest story is useful in understanding audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. Audiences’ emotional responses to the programmes are also similar to audience responses to other genres, such as soap opera and reality TV (Sood, 2002; Briggs, 2010). This highlights the similarities not only in programme structure but also in audience responses between wildlife docu-soaps and the genres which they draw on.

This section has explored how reviewers write about the human human-interest stories used in wildlife docu-soaps and how they think potential audience members are likely to respond. In these stories animals are represented as sharing forms of social organisation and interactions with humans and this is the focus of the next section.

6.2: Families

One of the ways that animals are represented as being ‘like humans’ is in their social organisation. For example, the programmes often focus on family aspects of the animals’ lives, and the term ‘family’ is especially used in MM and by audience members to refer to the social groups in which meerkats live. This contrasts with scientific language which refers to a group of meerkats as a ‘mob’. Talking of meerkats in terms of family highlights the similarities between meerkat and human social organization rather than emphasising

difference and, as I showed in Chapter 5, is a feature of both MM and OI. The use of the term family is also frequently found in the audiences' comments:

“As you can see this is a family not so different than ours” (TV.com)

“They are a real family” (TV.com)

These reviews suggest that the way in which the animal characters are represented as living in a family is uncontentious. For instance, the phrase ‘real family’ implies that the animal family portrayed in the docu-soaps has particular qualities of families, such as having a father and mother, close family ties and being willing to sacrifice yourself for other family members. The comment in the first review concludes that animal families are ‘not so different than ours’ which is precisely the reality that is represented in the programme. The qualities of “family” the programmes represent are often reflected in audience comments and the meerkats’ are perceived to live in family groups in the same way as humans.

Moreover, kinship terminology, such as mother or sister, is used to represent animals, and these terms often imply close emotional ties. I found that such terms are commonly used by audience members:

“She was just getting the respect she deserved from the family and then BOOM! Not only have the Whiskers lost their mother but their beloved sister too. That’s really messed up” (YouTube)

Using this language highlights the familial relationships between the meerkats and, in the comment, it is assumed that the loss of a mother and a sister has emotional consequences for the animal characters. The deaths of their mother, Flower, and ‘beloved sister’, Mozart, are ‘messed up’, the poster writes, and the phrase, ‘not only have the Whiskers lost their mother but their beloved sister too’, captures the reproduction of the terminology used in the programmes and the expectation that the loss of two family members would be devastating as would be expected in human families. The representations of the meerkats living in families is also connected with audience expectations of the animal characters,

such as having strong family ties and being in monogamous partnerships. Zaphod is a long-term mate of Flower's in MM, and many audience members express sympathy towards Zaphod when Flower dies. Furthermore, some comments reflect an expectation that Zaphod will experience grief, in a similar way to humans.

“Zaphod, we will all bear your burden of missing Flower, your job is too lead your family through hard times” (YouTube)

This comment implies that Zaphod will grieve for her, and that the audience will grieve with him. He will also have to lead the Whiskers on his own thereby shouldering the responsibility of being the head of the family. The use of terms such as family is connected with expectations of certain behavioural outcomes, and internal states, on the part of the animal characters that are familiar to audience members. It can also be seen as anthropomorphic in so far as it assumes similarities between humans and non-human animals and, in combination with the individualization of the animal characters, invites audience members to see the animals as persons. It encourages audience members to understand animals as having similar social organization, lives and values to humans, and these similarities are reproduced in many of the comments that are posted. This point also corresponds to Crist's (2000) idea of anthropomorphism: she discusses how the use of 'ordinary language' to describe animal behaviours highlights similarities between humans and other animals. Using language in this way in wildlife docu-soaps seems to have significant effects on audience responses. For instance, the use of words like 'family' is not only accepted by audience members but also reproduced in their comments; furthermore they see the similarities between humans and animals. This type of comment also reveals how the emotional and dramatic stories of individual animals, such as Zaphod losing his long-term partner, invite audience members to connect emotionally with the animals and accept the programmes' message that these animals have the same experiences as people; in this case expecting that Flower's family will go 'through hard times' after her death. Such responses also show how the narrative invites audience members to see individual human-like qualities and emotions in non-human animals (Hill, 2005; DeMello, 2012).

This is apparent in comments about similarities between the social organisation of humans and animals and the problems they face; animals' social organisation is said to be 'almost human' and animals are seen as having 'the same issues as humans'.

"Their social order is almost human" (IMDb)

"It teaches you about animals that have pretty much the same issues as humans" (TV.com)

Although this type of response was less common, the representations of the social aspects of animals' lives in the narrative are reflected in audience responses and suggests that audience members accept that animals and humans have similar social lives including living in families, experiencing conflicts, and forming romantic and sexual relationships. This point connects to wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre. They exhibit those aspects of soap opera which focus on family matters and relationships as well as featuring strong female characters in the family domain (Brown, 1994); these aspects are especially prominent in MM. Furthermore, anthropomorphised representations of animals combined with human-interest stories highlight similarities between humans and other animals, and audience responses reflect this. The use of anthropomorphic language and human-interest stories encourages audience members to not only recognise animals' individuality but also their commonalities with humans and leads to a blurring of the boundary between humans and animals in their responses.

There is also evidence that audiences read meanings from images as well as from the narration. An example of this is provided by the hugging behaviours of meerkats which are often interpreted as a sign of affection:

"If there were no altruistic reasons for the actions of these meerkats then there would be no cuddling at the end of the day or other signs of affection shared between them. You can't compare an arachnid to that of a mammal"
(YouTube)

In this comment ‘cuddling’ is seen as a sign of affection although there is no reference to affection in the narration. This demonstrates that audience members engage with and respond to the images. There is also an implicit recognition of the commonalities between meerkats and humans. The comment compares arachnids to mammals, implying that while mammals (a category that includes both meerkats and humans) might hug each other, arachnids are unlikely to do so; this indicates the acceptance of the categorical differences imposed on animals by science, which is anthropocentric. Indeed, altruism is also mentioned as a motivation for meerkat behaviour, the implication being that arachnids are not capable of altruism while meerkats and humans are. Although smaller in number, comments on the sociality of animals and similarities between humans and animals are also found in responses to OI:

“These apes seem more human than the people I see at Walmart” (YouTube)

“There is hardly an Orangutan I have seen here that doesn’t remind me of someone human. These gentle creatures make me strive to be a better person-go figure!” (YouTube)

These comments refer to similarities between humans and orangutans and a perception of greater humanity in orangutans compared with some humans. Such responses can be connected to how OI represents the animal characters where there is a strong emphasis on their emotional and moral lives (Chapter 5). They show that audience members understand orangutans as demonstrating humanity which they see as something positive and, in their view, raises the orangutans above some humans. This could be interpreted as orangutans exhibiting moral values that are usually associated with humans, and relates to Franklin’s argument that in post-modern cultures there is a tendency to see animals as morally superior to humans (Chapter 2). According to Franklin, people perceive humanity as “out of control, deranged, sick or insane” (p. 54) in post-modernity while in contrast animals are perceived as “good, peaceful, healthy and sane” (p. 54-55). The comments above reflect such sentiments but, at the same time, while they suggest that animals are more human than some humans, the benchmark being used is still humanity. Thus some humans are perceived as less than human in comparison with orangutans. This suggests that even though audiences may see animals as displaying humanity, their judgments are based on

ideas about what constitutes being human and that this is an ideal to strive for; in this sense they remain anthropocentric.

In this section I have focussed on how animals are represented in audience comments, their emphasis on similarities between humans and non-human animals and even, although fewer responses made this point, the greater humanity of animals when compared to some humans. The representation of similarities is found in the way the programmes are narrated and the language used and is an example of how representations are reflected in audience responses, but I have also shown that audiences create their own meanings as in the comments about meerkats' cuddling and the humanity of orangutans. I now turn to representations of gender.

6.3: Gender norms and expectations

In this section I explore the way gender stereotypes are attributed to animal characters in MM and how audiences respond to this. Gender stereotypes—as a generalised preconception of characteristics or attributes that “ought” to be possessed by men or women—contribute to normative expectations about how women and men should behave in society and are often represented in media texts (Chapter 3). The last chapter demonstrated that gender stereotypes are found in both MM and OI with characters' attributed characteristics often being gendered. Thus female characters are likely to be represented as caring or reserved although, as I show below, this is not always the case. Furthermore, male and female characters are often represented as carrying out stereotypically gendered social roles. I look first at ideas of ‘good’ mothering in MM.

The previous chapter showed that mothers are represented as having particular qualities, especially in MM; this is reflected in a moderate number of audience responses. As an example, one audience member comments:

“Flower did what any good mother would have done. A good mother cares for, loves, and protects her children no matter what the cost. Even if it means dying for her children” (YouTube)

Comments about ‘good mothers’ frequently mention caring and self-sacrifice and here they are combined with the observation that Flower did no more than any good mother would have done. The characteristics that are associated with good mothering in the narration, especially in relation to Flower but also in relation to mothers in OI (Chapter 5), are also found in audience responses which reflect a particular and widespread reading of the text.

In addition, although less frequent, normative representations of motherhood attract admiration in audience responses. For instance, the portrayal of selfless motherhood in MM leads to comments implying that the animal characters are more virtuous than humans:

“It’s a cruel lesson for some mothers...animals are above us sometimes⁹”
(YouTube)

This attribution of greater moral virtue to animals was noted above in responses to OI. The comment that ‘animals are above us sometimes’ reflects the view that the self-sacrifice of Flower for her family is positive, and morally of higher worth than some human mothers. The expectations of self-sacrifice are associated with mothers, not fathers (Bahr & Bahr, 2001), and, as the previous chapter showed, fathers and fatherhood hardly feature in the programmes. In the comment above it is specifically stated that self-sacrifice is ‘a cruel lesson for some mothers’ but there is no mention of fathers. This may be due to the fact that the whole MM series focuses on female characters, especially the strong female character of Flower, and that such a focus highlights particular aspects and meanings of motherhood. As well as sharing normative expectations of motherhood with the narration, audiences’ comments also reproduce the gender-stereotypical qualities attributed by the narration to animal characters. For instance, Mozart is frequently described as ‘selfless’ and ‘caring’, qualities that are often associated with femininity in Western culture (Sulik, 2007; Thompson, 2003).

However, it should be noted that gender-stereotypes sometimes arise from the misconception of audiences. For example, one of MM’s characters, Rocket Dog, is often

⁹ I have not taken any words from this comment, this is how it was written.

described as brave and strong in audience comments, and sometimes referred to with a male pronoun although the character is female. This reflects the way that certain characteristics which may be associated with “masculinity” and leads some audience members to perceive the character as male. In addition the name Rocket Dog also has masculine associations. On the other hand, Mozart, whose name could also be said to have masculine connotations, is a female character who is attributed with stereotypical female characteristics and is almost always referred to as ‘she’; there is no confusion about her gender in audience responses. Such findings indicate that certain characteristics are associated with gender by audience members but also that these assumptions are generated by audiences rather than the narrative. This points to the fact that audience members already hold stereotypical views of gender which shape their responses and suggests that, although there is gender stereotyping in the programme which is reproduced in the audience comments, audience members bring their own assumptions about gender to bear on the way they respond to individual animal characters. This mis-gendering of Rocket Dog also affects audience responses to the narrative. For instance, Rocket Dog’s actions are often associated with masculine qualities such as bravery and strength by audience members, and she is often praised for such qualities. Moreover, events are responded to differently based on the audiences’ gender assumptions. For instance, while the pregnancy of Mozart, who is perceived as a feminine character, is frequently talked about, Rocket Dog’s pregnancy is rarely mentioned even though she was pregnant and had a miscarriage in Season 3. In other words, Mozart’s role as a mother is highlighted while Rocket Dog’s is almost ignored by the audience members. This may be due to how the story highlights Mozart’s misfortune surrounding pregnancy and the way that story lines involving Rocket Dog do not focus on ‘feminine’ issues such as motherhood but instead deal with her attempts to become a leader. But it also suggests that audiences read characters through a gendered lens and that the mis-gendering of characters produces a different response to similar events. Such responses indicate that the perceived gender of animal characters affects which elements of the stories audience members respond to, and shows that gender expectations impact how audience members react to both the stories and the characters.

It should be noted that normativity and gender stereotype are more pronounced in the audience’s responses to MM than OI; this may be due to MM sharing elements with soap opera, particularly their focus on female characters, family drama and romance.

The discussion so far has shown that audience responses are often underpinned by assumptions of similarities between humans and other animals in terms of their social organisation and interactions and, in some cases, animals are viewed as morally superior to or more human than humans. This implies an attribution of morality to animals which I explore in the next section.

6.4: Morality

Both MM and OI ascribe morality to the animal characters through the narration. There are two elements to this, character and behaviour, and, in some cases, even the most ‘moral’ of characters is judged to be acting immorally. I look first at the moral qualities ascribed to the animal characters before going on to look at the morality of their actions. In MM and OI, each character is ascribed with certain moral values depending on their attributed personalities and life histories and audience members frequently refer to the morality of each character as part of their personality. Moreover, each character’s name is also associated with a certain moral quality. For instance, Mozart in MM is recognized in audience responses as morally “good”, as shown below:

“Mozart is also my favourite meerkat. Very caring, loving and helpful”
(YouTube)

Moral qualities are widely accepted as intrinsic to an animal character by audiences online and it has been pointed out that one of the effects of anthropomorphism is to encourage people to see animals as having moral worth (Gray, Gray & Wegner, 2007; Gebhard, Nevers & Billmann-Mahecha, 2003). In this comment the moral qualities of Mozart are engaged with and responded to positively. This shows that unique qualities are attributed to individual characters through the stories, as is the case in other genres such as soap opera (Fluton et al, 2006; Brown, 1994). Moral qualities are attributed based on the role of the character and how they relate to other characters and they have an impact on audience responses. Also, relating to my earlier discussion, moral qualities are gendered: while Rocket Dog is described in masculine terms, Mozart is described as having stereotypically feminine qualities such as being loving and helpful.

As I showed in Chapter 5, some characters are ascribed with positive moral qualities, while others are given negative ones in order to create a story. For instance, Hannibal in MM is attributed with a mean and cruel personality, as he is a “feared leader” of the rival meerkat group. This is also the case for Hamlet in OI: when he first appears in the programme, he is represented as an outsider who threatens the inhabitants of Orangutan Island. These moral valuations of characters are reflected in a moderate number of audience comments.

“Hannibal is "Just Plan Mean" not nice!!!" (TV.com)

“I do not like Hamlet he is mean!!” (YouTube)

These comments show that audience members express negative moral judgments about the characters which reflect the moral valuation of characters in the narration. This highlights the importance of the narrative in relation to audience responses: the characters are created to tell compelling stories, and how they are individualized and placed in the story impacts on how they are perceived by audience members. Although the above comments are targeted towards specific individuals, they illustrate how negative representations impact on the way animals are perceived by audiences (Silk et al., 2017).

The strong reflection in audience responses of values represented in the narrative is also demonstrated by another audience comment:

“Mozart was one of my favourite meerkats, back in the days when she was credited as being caring” (TV.com)

This comment suggests that Mozart’s character changed over time, and she was a ‘favourite’ when she was ‘credited as being caring’ which was at the start of the series. She changed as the story developed and became less caring as she set up a new group in Season 3. This demonstrates how audience members respond to character development and narrative, changing their loyalty to characters as the narrative develops and the character’s behaviour changes. It highlights the importance of narratives which anthropomorphise, individualise and morally judge animal characters to audience responses. Audience responses often reproduce the value judgments in the narrative and lead to animal characters being valued positively or negatively. This point connects to Hill’s (2005) on

how narration has a significant role in telling animal stories because they cannot tell their own. My findings suggest that the stories told about the animals have a significant impact on how audience members respond to them and raises an important point about the ethics of telling a story which attributes certain qualities and personalities to animals. The negative influence of representations of animals is exactly what Silk et al. (2017) are concerned about regarding sharks in the film *Jaws*. Also, this moral issue of telling animals' stories is connected to Mills' (2017) discussion of the implications of representations of animals. He argues that some representations "reduce these animals to nothing other than metaphors for humans" (p. 106). Attributing moral values to animals who cannot tell their own stories courts the danger of telling stories about humans rather than the animals themselves.

Moreover, how the outcome of a character's action is presented in the narrative also has an effect on a character's perceived moral quality. For instance, Flower, at the beginning of the series, is regarded as a noble leader and selfless mother. However, as the series progresses she evicts Mozart from the group due to Mozart's pregnancy which eventually leads to Mozart dying alone. The narrative dramatizes and emotionalizes the actions of Flower and constructs Mozart's death as emotional and tragic. This leads several audience members to perceive Flower's action to kick Mozart out of the group as immoral:

"boo! Screw flower! She kicked out pregnant Mozart which led to Mozart's death" (YouTube)

"I always hated Flower for the harsh way she treated/evicted Mozart and several others and I was looking forward to seeing the spoiler that told what was going to [happen to] her" (TV.com)

As the comments above demonstrate, Flower's action in evicting Mozart and letting her die is criticized by audience members. The comment 'Boo! Screw Flower!' uses language typical of YouTube, and although audience members in TV.com express the same idea, that Flower's actions were reprehensible, the language they use differs. These differences relate to the conventions of the platform (for further discussion see Chapters 4 and 8). Criticism of Flower, and other animal characters who cause the death of a meerkat, is

frequent in audience comments. However, the perception of immorality in this case is created through the narrative. For example, Mozart is Flower's daughter, and, in audience comments, letting your own daughter die is viewed as immoral. Also, the narrative dramatizes and emotionalizes Mozart's death and this is reflected in audiences' responses. Indeed, audience members comment that the moment when Wilson, Mozart's alleged lover, finds out that Mozart is dead is one of the saddest and most tragic moments in the whole Meerkat Manor series.

While occurring in only a few responses, romantic aspects of the story are also attributed with moral qualities by audience members. An example is when Flower 'cheated' on her mate, Zaphod.

“Flower just cheated on Zaphod with Houdini... WHO-RE!” (YouTube)

In this comment Flower is called 'whore' due to the way she is portrayed in the narrative. On the surface the comment is written in an angry tone and this is how I read it, but it could also be an attempt at humour, especially given the conventions of YouTube where there are many humorous comments. In either case the comment refers to an episode (Season 3, The Death of Romance) where Flower 'sneaks out' to see Houdini, who is a roving male from another group, and Zaphod, Flower's long term partner, chases him off. The story-line portrays the relationship between Flower and Zaphod as an intimate monogamous relationship and, as a consequence, many audience members perceive Flower's action in trying to mate with Houdini as 'cheating'. Although the narrator does not explicitly state that Flower is 'cheating' on Zaphod, he highlights that Flower tries to 'sneakily' see Houdini without Zaphod noticing which implies that Flower is doing something wrong. There are several comments condemning Flower's action as immoral. In the one I have quoted, the way whore is written is typical of YouTube; this type of comment is not found on IMDb and TV.com where language is more measured though the sentiments expressed are similar.

It should be noted also that audiences' harsh judgements of Flower's actions appear to be associated with gender. Flower is often judged more harshly than other characters, and this may be due to the representation of her as a leader who is strong and stoic. When she is

being a caring mother, audience members like her, and even admire her actions, but when she is being a strong and stoic leader, qualities more associated with masculinity than femininity, and doing what has to be done to hold the group together, she is judged harshly. This suggests that normative expectations about gender appropriate behaviour are being used to evaluate animal behaviours.

Moreover, a character can have different moral attributions assigned to them in different parts of a story. During the course of a series, the narrative develops as do the characters; their actions and surroundings also change. Such changes mean that a character's moral worth is judged differently by audiences. As I discussed in previous sections, Flower is represented as a caring mother but also as an 'evil' figure who evicts and indirectly kills her own daughter. This demonstrates that a character can be represented as both morally "good" and "bad" depending on which part of the programme viewers are referring to. It also highlights the moral ambiguity of Flower's character which is reflected in different audience responses. For instance, in the quotes above, Flower is criticized for her actions, but when she adopts the enemy pup, Axel, and dies while protecting her own pups in a burrow, viewers judge her as morally good:

"Poor flower gave her life for her family. I wonder how rare is it for meerkats to adopt abandoned pups (axel) she never seemed to have the heart to kill pups. She forced abandonment but never killed them (or they never showed it)"
(YouTube)

These different responses show that the morality attributed to animal characters is ambiguous and changes along with plot development. It also shows how audience responses relate to such changes, altering their perceptions of the characters in terms of moral worth. The way that characters' actions and situations change over time, highlights similarities between wildlife docu-soaps and genres such as soap opera. It also points to how audience members can shift their identification with characters which is discussed further in Chapter 7.

In this section, I have discussed the attributions of moral qualities to animal characters through the narratives of wildlife docu-soaps, how such attributions are engaged with in

audience responses and how audiences read texts in a range of ways. In much of this, animals are seen as ‘awfully humanlike’ but when the killing of animal characters is concerned there are contradictory responses; I explore this in the next section.

6.5: The morality of killing in Meerkat Manor

Audiences’ responses to the death of animal characters vary and partly depend on the moral qualities attributed to them. Killing frequently happens in MM though not in OI, this discussion therefore focuses on MM. The perceived morality of animal characters can influence audience responses to their death. For instance, a few responses suggest that the concept of karma is invoked in reference to Flower getting what she deserved when she was killed by a snake.

“That's what she gets [referring to the death of Flower]... Karma is a bitch whether whale or snail! Flowers constantly kicked her daughters out of the group to live lonely and agonizing little lives! Especially in her daughter Mozart's case. Sometimes even going to the extent of relocating to different burrows just to make her daughters choose between the family or their new litter of pups (her grandchildren)! So fuck Flowers, she got exactly what she put out!” (YouTube)

In this comment the death of Flower is said to be deserved due to her actions against her daughters, in particular Mozart, and is explained in terms of karma which is closely related to ideas of morality. Although in many comments Flower is still perceived as a good character and her death is recognised as tragic, those who judge Flower as morally bad frequently wish bad outcomes for her and see her death as deserved. This example shows that there is a range of responses to characters’ moral status and that audience members respond to these media texts differently.

Notions of morality are also closely associated with audience responses to how the characters die. In many comments there is a wish for morally good characters to have a “good death”. For instance, a natural death, such as a death from old age, is perceived as a “good death” as it indicates that a character has lived their lives to their full extent. On the

other hand, although less frequent, some deaths are described as “bad deaths”, and a “bad death” happening to a morally good and likeable character attracts sympathetic responses.

“That is horrible that out of all the causes of death in the Manor she gets hit by a car!” (YouTube)

As this comment demonstrates, a character’s death from being hit by a car is seen as ‘horrible’. There are several deaths in the series that are perceived as “bad deaths”, such as Rocket Dog getting hit by a car and Len being killed by a hawk, and the bad death of a morally good character is frequently perceived as unfair and undeserved.

Furthermore, actions on the part of animal characters which inflict injury or death on other characters often attract moral judgement and are perceived negatively by audience members. In one episode, the Commandos killed the Whiskers’ pups and Hannibal, their leader, attracts condemnation.

“Hannibal makes me sick. He’ll kill any pup he sees except his own. And he always trespasses into the Whiskers territory. He is the devil of the Kalahari. He killed Mozart’s new born pups. He killed poor little Bubble. Twisted”
(TV.com)

Members of the Commandos are often portrayed as “ferocious” with the leader Hannibal often represented as a feared and cruel character. The Whiskers are the main characters of the story which is told from their point of view and the Commandos are represented as villains who threaten them. Although both the Whiskers and the Commandos are meerkats, how the story portrays and attributes qualities to them divides them into heroes and villains (Chapter 5). This assessment of Hannibal and the Commandos is also frequently found in audience responses, as in the comment above, and demonstrates the connection between the narrative and the moral judgements made about meerkats from rival gangs involved in killing members of the Whiskers. This contrasts with the moral approval of Flower’s magnanimity in not killing Axel.

Audiences' perceptions of killing are closely associated with moral responsibility.

Hannibal is perceived as morally responsible for killing the Whiskers pups, and thus, he is judged as morally evil. By attributing responsibility in this way, audiences perceive the animal characters' actions as deliberate and wilful.

“He [Youssarian] practically MURDERED that pup of Mozart's and now he's done it again with Daisy's and aren't daisy's pups also his? Who here agrees with me?” (TV.com)

In this comment the word ‘murder’ is used which implies an intentionality and a moral responsibility. Another audience member agrees that Youssarian killed the pups and hates him for it.

“Yes I hate him to [too]. He killed one of Mozart's new born pups. I WILL ALWAYS HATE HIM!” (TV.com)

This exchange highlights the interaction of audience members within a community and that the first poster wants their moral judgement validated by others. The way forums function as communities is explored more fully in Chapter 8. In the exchange Youssarian, one of the members of the Whiskers, is blamed for trying to move Mozart's pups from one burrow to another, and one time, one of them fell behind and died. Youssarian is blamed for the death and perceived to be morally responsible for his action.

However, the action of Youssarian is defended in other comments, although fewer in number. For instance, one comment questions the representation of Youssarian in the programme:

“He got terribly false publicity - one thing I really detested about MM. Sure, it's great to give characters personalities, but many were completely ridiculous... like Youssarian - there was so much more to that beautiful 'kat than what the show depicted” (YouTube)

These comments suggest the idea that the narrative attributes certain moral qualities onto animal characters in order to create a personality which, in the poster's eyes, may not represent animals accurately. This is highlighted by the use of the phrase, 'false publicity'. This kind of comment reflects an awareness of how reality in the programme is constructed and may be facilitated by para-texts such as the research website associated with MM (see Chapter 8).

Moreover, attributions of responsibility for killing are also widely debated on the basis that the characters are animals and therefore, unlike humans, not moral agents. While several audience members perceive killing of other meerkats as murder and immoral, others perceive such actions as justifiable because they are a natural and necessary part of life in the wild. For instance, one audience member comments:

“They are just meerkats and need to do what they need to do to survive”
(TV.com)

Here killing is perceived as necessary for survival and is not conceptualised as murder. Another audience member comments:

“A lot of people hate kinkajou for the fact that she killed her sister's pups. But I don't blame her for doing that. The only thing why she did that was because she followed her instincts. And all animals do and kill other animals. They have to do that to survive in the big and dangerous Kalahari” (YouTube)

While comments which are critical of Kinkajou's action are more prevalent, there are others, like the one above, which defend it as instinctive and necessary. These contradictory audience responses are connected to how the animal characters are represented in the narrative: while similarities between humans and non-human animals are highlighted through the language used by the narrator, animals are also represented as wild animals who differ from humans. These different aspects of the narrative, together with para-textual sources, are available to audiences and, while some comments attribute

moral qualities onto the animals, others see the action of killing as a necessary part of life in the wild. This shows the variety of possible audience responses to the programmes.

The focus of the next section is the way meerkat predators are perceived in audience responses and whether this relates to moral judgement.

6.6: Responses to meerkat and orangutan predators

Meerkats and orangutans have predators which appear in the programmes; they attract negative responses from audiences and are often associated with negative moral qualities and characteristics through the narratives. As I have shown, responses to meerkats vary and include positive and negative responses and moral judgements. In contrast, responses to animals who prey on meerkats and orangutans are almost always represented in the narration as having negative qualities and this negative valuation also appears in audience responses. While there is considerable discussion of meerkat predators in the MM audience responses, the OI community does not exhibit any response to predatory species. This may be connected to differences in the fatality rate of predator attacks in the programmes. While orangutans in OI are in a rehabilitation facility and receive appropriate treatment after an attack, meerkats in MM do not receive any human care. Thus, individuals die from predation in MM, but not in OI¹⁰. Also, MM's representation of predators is constructed through narratives which perceive meerkat predators in a negative light and judge them as morally bad. In the MM online communities, predatory animals such as snakes are a target of hatred as they threaten the meerkats: there are episodes where meerkats are actually injured or killed by snakes. These comments on YouTube express this hatred in a particularly vitriolic and excessive way that is typical of the platform.

“Right here is what I wanna fucking do now: mom I’m going to the Kalahari with a gun mom: why to shoot a fucking snake cuz it killed the manor's flower!” (YouTube)

¹⁰ There are few individuals injured by predators in OI, but they receive adequate treatment from veterinarians, no orangutan dies because of predators in the whole series.

“Stupid friggin Jackal I hope that the Jackal that killed Mozart gets its ugly face ripped off!!!!!!!!!!” (YouTube)

“I hate any snake including cobras. They r deathly killers” (YouTube)

Words like ‘stupid’ and ‘deathly killers’ demonstrate the posters’ negative views of the predators and, I would argue, is connected to how they are represented by the narrator. For instance, in one episode, the narrator explains:

“A cape cobra, one of the most venomous snakes in Africa. One bite from this ambush predator could easily kill a meerkat...a deadly predator so close to the baby-sitting burrow just won’t be tolerated”

In this extract, a Cape cobra is narrated as a deadly enemy who is likely to kill meerkat pups. This representation also appears in the audience responses above.

The narration is also connected to audience responses towards predators in general. Comments contain negative attitudes towards not only specific individual predators in the programme but also to any animal that preys on meerkats or orangutans. For instance, in the quotes above, the audience member comments ‘I hate any snake’ and ‘shoot a fucking snake’. Although few in number, these comments reflect their hatred of the whole category snake, not just the individual responsible for the death, and are expressed in hyperbolic language which is typical of comments on YouTube.

Having said that, there are also expressions of hatred towards particular individual predators.

“All you had to do was kill the damn thing [snake] instead of watching it douchebag! Save the meerkats, down with the useless snake!” (YouTube)

In the comment above, the audience member addresses the TV crews and researchers directly, saying they should have killed the snake before it killed Flower. Negative attitudes like this towards a specific predator are frequent in audience responses, with

reference being made to individual predators who killed or injured an audience member's favourite character. This shows how negative attitudes in audience responses are linked to the representation of predators as a threat to one of the main characters. Through their engagement with the story, audience members become emotionally engaged with the main characters, and this in turn elicits negative feelings towards individual predators.

6.7: Humans in wildlife docu-soaps

Moral judgements are also frequently apparent in audience responses to humans, whether they be film crew or researchers failing to intervene to prevent a meerkat death in MM, or conservationists ensuring that young orangutans are equipped for life in the wild in OI.

The question of human intervention to prevent the death of individual animals is frequently discussed by MM audiences online and shows that audiences are aware of how the programmes are made and the possibility of the makers changing the course of events. This is something that is particularly striking in audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. For instance, Flower's death from snake venom could have been cured by an antidote, and in this case, audience members discuss whether researchers or TV crews on the site should have helped her. Some comments oppose human intervention in the forthright way typical of YouTube:

"It isn't the fault of the researchers that the meerkats die, it's the natural way of life, dog eat dog, survival of the fittest. Deal with it" (YouTube)

"The researchers and camera people are there to study meerkats, and make a documentary. They can't interfere so everything can go according to plan, they have to let nature take its course" (YouTube)

In these comments, the deaths of animal characters are seen as a natural life process, as demonstrated by the phrases 'natural way to die', 'survival of the fittest' and 'nature takes its course'. Such statements are widely used and reveal assumptions about the 'wild' and 'nature' as excluding the human. Nature has to be left to take its course without human intervention which would be unnatural. In MM deaths are portrayed as a "natural" process

in the “wild”, and this view is also found in comments about human intervention being an unnecessary intrusion. The dualism of nature and culture and exclusion of humans from nature are typical of Western philosophical thought (Newton, 2007) and associated with the human-animal distinction (Eder, 1996); similarly these audience responses accept the separation of humans from ‘nature’. Similar views are reflected in another comment:

“They have to let nature take its course. This is a documentary remember. And a snake can kill a human too, remember” (YouTube)

Audience perceptions of MM as a wildlife documentary lead them to see the death of animal characters as part of nature and human intervention as inappropriate.

“it’s something you have to accept as a necessary aspect of the natural world. so learn to respect nature for what it is, and not the fairy-tale perception of what you desire it to be” (YouTube)

In this quote, there is criticism of the view that the animal characters are special and should be treated as if they were not part of ‘the natural world’: the comment names others’ desires to change the outcomes as resulting from a ‘fairy-tale perception’.

In a moderate number of other responses, however, human intervention is regarded as desirable. Although the programme makers and the researchers of MM made official statements on websites and social media platforms that they have a ‘no intervention policy’, some audience members disagree with such a policy and express ethical, moral and emotional responses:

“Whoever filmed this to leave a meerkat dead when they obviously were there filming it and could have saved it is not an animal lover in my opinion. This disturbed me and I think you should rethink your filming process!” (IMDb)

This viewer is upset by the death of a meerkat and claims that the TV crews should have helped the animal. Such an emotional response is connected with their affection towards animals, as reflected in the comment that people who let animals die are ‘not an animal lover’. Such critical responses are especially connected to the perception that the people on the site could have helped the animal but chose not to which seems to fuel anger.

In addition, audience members who argue for intervention frequently perceive animal characters as special and different from other wild animals, and think that human intervention is justified:

“I know the camera crew can’t help the wildlife but flower was different they could have saved them!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” (YouTube)

“I know Cambridge University isn’t supposed to interfere with nature. But there should have been an exception and they should have given flower the anti-venom to save her life. Flowers blood is on their hands” (YouTube)

The programmes’ narratives highlight the individuality of each animal, giving them characters and personalities (Chapter 5). Such representations make sense of audiences’ responses towards animal characters’ deaths which is similar to responses to soap opera. There is an important difference, though; in soap opera, while a character may die the actor acting them does not. In wildlife docu-soaps the animal ‘acting’ and the character are one and the same so deaths are assumed by viewers to be real. Similarly in the making of reality TV, participants are monitored to ensure that they are not unduly harmed. There is therefore a difference between human and animal treatment in the making of TV programmes and, given the similarities between humans and animals emphasised in wildlife docu-soaps, and the attachments to animal characters that are formed, it is understandable that audience members react to particular deaths with anger, particularly when they see them as avoidable.

These contradictory responses show that while death is seen as an inevitable “fact of nature”, audience members react emotionally to individual deaths. These sentiments are usually found in separate comments and I have not found evidence of their being held by

the same poster. In theory, however, these responses are not mutually exclusive: the same person who recognizes a death as natural could also be emotionally involved and perceive the animal characters as special and needing to be saved.

As well as humans being taken to task for failing to intervene to prevent the deaths of meerkats in MM, audiences also respond to the different types of human activity narrated in OI. OI provides a mixed representation of humans. Some are portrayed as “saviours” working in the rehabilitation facility for the orangutans while others are connected to habitat destruction, the reason why orangutans have to be cared for in the facility. Such mixed representations of humans are reflected in just a few audience responses:

“It has been super informative and I never knew how amazing these creatures could [be]. I would love to visit Borneo and meet Lone Nielsen. It’s heart-warming yet sad to see what humans can actually do to these amazing creatures” (TV.com)

A third criticism of human relations with animals in docu-soaps concerns the exploitation of animals for human ends. This is particularly noticeable in responses to MM where there is no visual human presence in the programmes. Nevertheless, several comments express hatred and distrust towards the programme makers and the researchers on the filming site:

“The producers were selfish and wanted ratings over the overall safety of an animal” (YouTube)

““Scientific study” of “nature’s course” is complete rubbish. Natural Law is in fact a “give and take”, or fair exchange; in the natural world species dependent on others will help other species survival. Animal Planet made tons of money from filming these meerkats. The least they could do is to help the main characters with anti-venom in time of need. Letting them die in the name of fake “scientific objectivity” is ludicrous propaganda. Take some responsibility” (YouTube)

Audience members point out that the way researchers and programme makers make money out of the meerkats is exploitative. The comment above questions the morality of filming animals without helping them, and the ethics of filming and making profit from them. This suggests that questions are raised in audience responses that are not raised explicitly in the programmes themselves.

This discussion has shown that there are differences in audience responses concerning humans in MM and OI. Audience responses to OI reflect the contradictory representations and narrations of humans in the programme while, although MM does not have an explicit human presence on screen, audience members are aware of their presence off screen and are critical of them, both in terms of intervention for the benefit of individual animals and the ethics of filming wild animals.

6.8: Educational entertainment

In wildlife docu-soaps education and entertainment are indistinguishable, and audience responses reflect this, sometimes responding to the dramatic, human-interest story and sometimes to what the programmes impart about animal lives. Responses include comments on how they enjoy learning about the animals and their environment:

“Fascinating show that teaches you so much about some of the smallest animals on this planet” (IMDb)

This comment refers to meerkats as ‘some of the smallest animals on the planet’ which suggests that the poster is only referring to mammals; insects and microbes are much smaller than meerkats. This notwithstanding, representations of bio-diversity and information about the animals, such as how they live in their habitat, are perceived by audiences as educational and responses reflect enjoyment. This is demonstrated in some of the reviews:

“It has been super informative and I never knew how amazing these creatures could [be]” (TV.com)

“Along the way you will learn a lot about nature and how cruel the animal kingdom really is” (TV.com)

“Very eye opening, and has GREAT educational value, no fairy tale Hakuna Matata stuff here!” (TV.com)

As the quotes above demonstrate, the programmes are perceived as informative and educational and this aspect of them is favourably received. The last review comments ‘no fairy tale Hakuna Matata stuff here!’ which reflects the reviewer’s perception that the programme is not like a fictional Disney film. The phrase ‘Hakuna Matata’ comes from the Disney animation film *Lion King* where animals are anthropomorphised in a particular way: the animated animal characters speak a human language and, as DeMello (2012) says, are human characters in animal disguise. Compared to *Lion King*, the reviewer above believes that the representations of animals in MM reflect how wild animals actually live. Such perceptions may be encouraged through audience expectations of the documentary genre, and there are many comments expressing enjoyment of learning about animals and their habitats through wildlife docu-soaps.

The perception that representations of animals in MM and OI reflect the way animals live in the wild may also be reinforced by the reality TV aspects of the genre. Those aspects are common in reality TV programmes which focus on the everyday lives of its subjects. Murray (2004) comments that they use:

“natural” settings without a game setup, use cinema verité techniques, and do not contain flagrantly commercial elements such as product placement or the promise of prizes (p. 42).

Although contemporary reality TV often includes product placements, Murray’s comment is relevant to wildlife docu-soaps where animal characters are, supposedly, in their ‘natural habitat’, and the stories focus on their daily lives. It is particularly relevant for OI where unrelated orangutans are placed on an island together. This can lead audiences to believe that they are watching a ‘true’ representation of wild animals going about their daily lives. It should be noted, however, that in both MM and OI these so-called natural habitats are

bounded, in the case of OI by the sea and in the case of MM by fencing around the protected area in which they live. This points to the way the ‘natural’ is socially constructed both linguistically and on the ground, and the complexity of the idea of ‘natural habitat’ presented in the programmes. MM especially claims at the beginning of the programme that they depict ‘the real life and death events that take place in the Whiskers meerkat family’. This can be seen as a truth claim and begs the question of how this reality is constructed within the programme. Audience members who respond positively to the informational and educational elements of the narratives may perceive the programmes to be reflecting rather than constructing reality. This is explored further in chapter 8, where I discuss how dramatic stories are perceived as ‘lies’ while information from para-texts such as research websites are seen as ‘truth’.

While some responses relate to the educational aspects of the programmes, a larger number of responses refer to their dramatic and entertainment aspects. Indeed, some audience members praise these aspects:

“If you are looking for quality entertainment, screw E!'s Top 100 Juiciest Breakups, watch Meerkat Manor” (IMDb)

“The perfect soap opera, Meerkat Manor has it all. With dangerous liaisons, mob family fighting, and internal family rivalries this show could easily pass for any prime time soap” (IMDb)

“The program is what show like Big Brother and Celebrity Love Island want to be. The show is just a great piece of television, whether it's the members of the family sneaking of to a different clan to have a quick nookie or to the young-ones fighting off elders for bits of scorpion!” (IMDb)

These are reviews of MM posted by audience members and they mention, with approval, the dramatic events and, in the second quote, MM is categorised as a soap opera. In the third review, there is a reference to MM being like Big Brother and Celebrity Island, and again the dramatic aspects, such as a ‘quick nookie’ and ‘fighting’, are seen as what makes MM ‘a great piece of television’. Those reviews highlight the hybridity of wildlife docu-

soaps and their similarities to other genres and it is this which is emphasised in the recommendation of them as ‘quality entertainment’. They also demonstrate the reviewers’ familiarity with genre conventions.

The wildlife docu-soaps indeed contain many dramatic interactions among the characters such as problems with family members or friends, romantic affairs, and neighbourhood rivalries. These dramatic interactions are also represented in the narration as emotional for the animal characters, and this emotional content motivates some audience members to continue watching the shows. The comment below describes the emotions felt by viewers that are generated by the emotional content of the programme.

“A show that will put you in to tears, make you extremely happy and can take your breath away. The cutest family in the Kalahari makes a great story of love, hate, revenge, anger, happiness, death, life, terror, and suffering. Everything it takes to make a great show” (TV.com)

This discussion has shown that audiences enjoy both the entertainment and educational aspects of the programmes and highlights the variety of audience responses. It also shows an awareness amongst some audience members of genre and how it works in wildlife docu-soaps to provide educational entertainment.

6.9: Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the narratives of wildlife docu-soaps influence audience responses but, at the same time, audiences’ responses vary and reflect a range of possible readings of the programmes. I argued that human-interest stories engage audience members emotionally with the animal characters and the drama of their lives. Furthermore, audiences engage with and are sometimes critical of the narrative, particularly in relation to the morality attributed to the animal characters.

I have shown that in many responses, audience members use the language used in the narration. As well as engaging emotionally with the human-interest stories, they use terms like family and sister which are used in the narratives to represent relationships between

the animal characters. They also reproduce the normative representations of mothers and motherhood that are found in the narration. At the same time, my findings show that audience members read the programmes in ways that may not be offered in the narration. For instance, they sometimes reject the morality attributed to the animal characters and even question it as arbitrary. Also, audiences' responses towards human involvement with animals highlights the diversity of responses. In OI, humans are both represented as good (saving orangutans) and bad (destruction of animals' habitat) and audience responses reflect these representations. In MM, however, audience members question the decisions of researchers and film crews and raise questions about the ethics of filming. This finding demonstrates that audiences do not simply reproduce the representations in the narratives, but actively engage with the meanings offered and create their own.

I have also shown that some responses relate to the educational aspects of the programmes while others engage with them as entertainment. This relates to the status of wildlife docu-soaps as hybrid genre. On one hand, the animals are characters involved in dramatic human-interest stories similar to soap opera or reality TV while, on the other hand, they are actual live animals. This dual status of the animals created by this hybrid genre is, I argue, connected to the various audience responses towards interventions in the animals' lives. While some audience members insist that the humans filming the animals should help them because they are 'special', others argue that death is part of nature and that human intervention to prevent it would not be appropriate. These responses reflect different views about 'nature' and the relation between humans and wild animals with the former recognising their inter-relationship and the latter seeing nature as something separate from the human. The way audiences respond to human intervention also shows an awareness of how the programmes are made and may be specific to wildlife docu-soaps.

This chapter has focused on the narratives in wildlife docu-soaps and how they shape audience responses showing that, although audience responses often reproduce the framework of meaning offered by the narrative, there are other readings evident in their responses which show an awareness of genre and how the programmes are made. The next question is whether audiences respond emotionally to the programmes and this is the focus of the following chapter.

Chapter 7: Audiences' emotional responses to wildlife docu-soaps: categorizations, identifications and emotional relationships

In the previous chapter I focused on narratives and how audiences respond to them. In this chapter I turn my attention to whether audiences respond to the programmes emotionally, exploring the connections between audiences' emotional responses and the individualisation of animal characters. The importance of individualisation in relation to empathetic responses to animals has been noted by others. For instance, research on human-pet relations shows that individualisation is necessary for strong emotional connections (Grier, 2006; Charles, 2014) with pet animals often having names, and owners recognizing their individuality and status as family members (Thomas, 1983; Voith, 1985; Charles, 2016). This supports the view that individualisation facilitates the perception of animals as distinct individuals (Sanders, 2003a) with their own feelings and experiences. I also look at how audiences anthropomorphize animals and how the animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps call forth similar emotional responses to human characters in other genres.

Anthropomorphism, as I use it in this thesis, borrows from Crist (2000, p. 29) who defines it as the use of everyday language to describe and explain 'animal life' in a way that leads to 'the emergence of animals as subjects' (see Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion). I argue that, because of similarities between wildlife docu-soaps and other genres, concepts that have been developed to analyse audiences' emotional responses, such as para-social relations and identification, are also useful for understanding emotional responses to wildlife docu-soaps. However, the animal-ness of the characters in wildlife docu-soaps also facilitates emotional connection and this is not accounted for by existing concepts.

I begin my discussion by looking at what kind of emotional responses audiences express, how they relate to individualisation, and how they compare with their responses to animals who are not individualised.

7.1: Animals as individuals

Individualisation is not in question in human-based genres; in reality TV and soap opera, for instance, it is taken for granted as contributing to audiences' emotional responses (Godlewski & Perse, 2010; Ahmed, 2012) and the relationship between individualisation and emotions is widely documented in the literature by scholars like Morton (2002). In wildlife docu-soaps, however, the individualisation of animal characters is explicit and takes place in a particular way. For instance, the animals have names, personality traits and moral values which are attributed through the narratives. They also have a personal story which is developed and built up through the episodes. My contention is that audiences' emotional responses to animal characters are enabled by individualisation. This is because it weakens the categorical and plural identity of animals and encourages people to consider an animal as a unique individual with their own history, personality and cognition (Sanders, 2003a); this, in turn, challenges the anthropocentric assumption that non-human animals are dispensable units (Stibbe, 2001) and unworthy of moral treatment and affection. The main animal characters in MM and OI are individualised and, in this section, I explore audience perceptions of them as distinct individuals, and how such perceptions are connected to audiences' emotional responses. In the next section I discuss audiences' different responses to animals, such as predators, who are not individualised.

As I showed in Chapter 5, animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps are individualised through the attribution of various personalities and characteristics to them by the narration. These attributions are reproduced in audience comments.

“Flower is the queen of Kalahari” (YouTube)

“Chen chen is a boss” (YouTube)

Audience members also recognize each character as having an individual biography and being unique:

“I guess every meerkat has its own special story.. :)” (YouTube)

“There’s something adorable and unique about each of them” (YouTube)

Despite this recognition, the first quote uses ‘it’ to refer the meerkats, rather than him/her, something that they would be unlikely to do when referring to a human character. It has been argued that this use of language represents animals as objects which ‘can be bought, sold, and owned’ (Stibbe, 2001, p. 151). The use of ‘it’ in audience comments reflects the contradiction inherent in audience perceptions of the animal characters: audience members feel emotionally connected to the animal characters and see them as individuals while some also distance themselves by the language they use. Nevertheless, audience comments demonstrate that the individuality of the animals is recognized and accepted and my findings show that audiences’ emotional responses towards animal characters are connected to their familiarity with them and their recognition of their uniqueness.

7.2: Audiences’ emotional responses online

In this section, I explore emotional responses towards the animal characters in MM and OI. I show that these responses include a wide range of emotions from love and sympathy to anger and hate and are dependent on the individualisation of animal characters. Emotional responses to the animal characters were coded as: love/like, hate/dislike and empathy (see Chapter 4). The qualitative analysis was then used to further investigate nuances and details in audience responses.

Audiences exhibit a range of positive emotions towards animal characters in both MM and OI. They express their emotional attachment to animal characters through the use of words like love and like:

“Jordan, Donald, Cha Cha, Saturnis...I guess I love them all!!” (TV.com)

“I LOVED Shakespeare. He had always been my favourite” (YouTube)

The use of words like love explicitly indicate audiences’ fondness for the animal characters. While some audience members ‘like’ all the animals, as in the first quote, others become attached to particular individuals and justify this attachment with reference to their personal traits:

“I love Mitch! He’s so brave, loyal, and strong. He does his job so well, too. You can always count on Mitch!” (TV.com)

“I like Oy-oy, but he died. So I like Saturnus. He's HILARIOUS! He makes me choke I laugh so hard! :.)” (YouTube)

As I discussed in Chapter 6, each animal is attributed a distinct personality through the narration and are recognized by audience members. The first comment above not only expresses admiration for Mitch’s traits but his ability to carry out his duties and implies that the viewer is following Mitch through the different episodes. The second quote capitalizes the word ‘hilarious’ to highlight their response to Saturnus (this is also a typical way of writing on YouTube). These comments show that animal characters are loved by audience members for particular reasons. The aesthetic beauty of a character also draws comments about loving and liking them:

“Zorilla certainly was one of my faves [favourites], and I must agree that, to me, she was the most beautiful suricate there was!” (YouTube)

“Jordan cracks me up with his runny nose!! Hes my favorite cause he always has this "Duh" look on his face lol” (YouTube)

This fondness for Zorilla is due to the aesthetics of her appearance which is unique to her. Also, in the second quote, the viewer likes Jordan because of a particular look on his face. Expressions of love for the aesthetic beauty of characters arise less frequently than for personality traits which may be because personality traits are more noticeably different among the characters than appearance. It also highlights that audience responses are shaped more by the narratives which construct personalities as opposed to visual representations which construct appearance.

Not only love but sympathy is also widely expressed.

“I really felt for her when she fell” (YouTube)

“The worst of my viewing was the night Flower died. Somehow, I was always in her corner every time she pulled her clan out of bad situations” (IMDb)

In the first quote, the poster adopts the viewpoint of the animal character. The expression, ‘felt for her’ reflects sympathy and even empathy. The second comment shows how they were affected by Flower’s death and their support for Flower. These quotes show how the experiences and life events of the animal characters draw forth emotional responses. Especially when animal characters face difficult situations or problems, audiences are strongly sympathetic towards them. For instance:

“Among all the meerkats, Mozart's story is the saddest. She tried so hard, endured so much, but wasn't rewarded a good life. I really wish that people at the film site could help her a bit. Life was so tough for her. I miss you, Mozart!” (YouTube)

In the quote above, sympathy is expressed towards Mozart and her life difficulties, demonstrating a familiarity with her character and biography. The comment at the end is directly addressed to Mozart in a way which personifies her even further. The viewer also regrets that the film makers did not help Mozart, an issue which arose frequently and which I explored in Chapter 6.

As well as positive emotions, both MM and OI audiences frequently express negative emotions towards particular animal characters, linking their feelings to the character’s personality:

“[I hate] flower because she is so mean!” (TV.com)

As with the characters’ positive traits, negative traits are attributed to certain individuals, as I showed in the previous chapter, and connected to audiences’ feelings about them. The analysis demonstrates that certain characteristics are perceived negatively by audiences

such as meanness, cruelty and promiscuity. Negative emotions are also expressed towards actions:

“I hate Hannibal, he made Carlos die!!!!” (YouTube)

Abominated actions are typically those which harm or lead to the death of other characters as I showed in the previous chapter. For instance, in the quote above, hatred of Hannibal is expressed as a result of the narrator in MM explaining that Carlos was wounded by Hannibal and the wound became infected which eventually led Carlos to die. It is also relevant that this post is on YouTube where emotions are often expressed in extreme and excessive ways. This post, for instance, has four exclamation marks suggesting some kind of excess; furthermore, ‘hate’ and hoping that someone dies are extreme expressions of emotion.

7.3: Naming animals

The previous section (7-2) discussed how emotional responses, whether positive or negative, are closely connected to individualisation. Here I consider naming which is both a means of distinguishing between individuals and an important component of an individual animal’s identity (Thomas, 1983). Indeed, in all the comments, individual animal characters were named and names are the most frequently mentioned aspects of the programmes amongst both MM and OI audiences. While the meerkat and orangutan characters are individually named, the predator species are not; this is significant for how audiences respond to them.

Audience members recognize the names of individual characters and associate them with distinct personality traits. This is shown in these comments:

“saturnus is such an ass lol.” (YouTube)

“Shakespeare: a heroic, courageous, smart, reliable, and the best big brother, warrior meerkat of the whiskers” (YouTube)

The first quote shows the joking way Saturnus is referred to which is indicated by the use of ‘lol’, something that is often found in YouTube comments and which could be read as indicating affection for the character. The second quote highlights the personality traits of Shakespeare and his different roles. Interestingly, how naming facilitates emotional responses to animal characters is discussed by MM audiences:

“A big problem was their giving the animals individual names that caused the fans to relate to them in a human-like way.” (TV.com)

“The thing is you know people are going to relate to animals if you give them names” (TV.com)

“We are personally affected by Flower, Shakespeare’s death because by naming them, it made the show more real for us” (YouTube)

The first quote suggests an active reading that critiques the programme’s convention of naming animals; this is seen as a problem precisely because it leads to audience members relating to animal characters in ‘human-like’ ways and, by implication, becoming emotionally involved. Naming and emotional involvement have been discussed by various scholars, such as Philips (1994), who comments that lab workers are often discouraged from naming their laboratory animals because it promotes an emotional attachment to them. The audience responses above also point to this effect of naming. In addition, seeing it as problematic that naming leads viewers to ‘relate to them [animals] in a human-like way’ suggests that a difference in the way viewers relate to humans and animals is seen as desirable and could be read as agreeing that an explicit species distinction needs to be maintained. In the third quote, the member says that naming makes the animal characters ‘more real’ – in this sense, they are not plural form animals living somewhere in the world, but individuals that audiences are familiar with because they know Flower’s and Shakespeare’s personalities, life struggles and biography.

The effect of naming animals is recognizable from the killing of the African lion, named Cecil, at the Hwange National Park in 2015, and the shooting of the gorilla, named Harambe, at The Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden in 2016. Cecil and Harambe became huge internet phenomena as their deaths caused international outrage (Ebert, 2017). While thousands of animals die in the world every day, those two animals become famous partly due to the recognition of them as individuals, they were not just a lion or a gorilla because they were Cecil and Harambe, and partly because of the way they died which was widely condemned.

The naming of animal characters in wildlife docu-soap is significant in comparison to other wildlife documentaries which individualise animals by attributing personal qualities to them, but naming is not usual. For wildlife docu-soaps, naming is essential in order to highlight the individuality of animals. This naming, in turn, facilitates audiences seeing animals as having their own individual personalities, like pets, who are named and have an emotional relationship with their owners. Audience comments often pointed out that the animal characters are like pets (see section 7-5 of this chapter).

7.4: Animals as representatives of a group

The previous sections discussed the individuality of animal characters and how individualisation is closely related to audiences' emotional responses. This section focuses on animals as group representatives as opposed to individuals. In MM and OI, some animal characters are not individualised. These are often predators or other animals living in the environment with the main characters, such as yellow mongooses in MM and macaque monkeys and coal snakes in OI.

The connection between depicting animals as representatives of a group and emotional distance is highlighted in animal studies. For instance, by removing individuality from animals, humans create 'the system that allows us to view animals as our resources' (Regan, 1996, p. 36). Livestock animals are perceived and treated like objects and resources, rather than individuals. This point relates to the way language influences emotional connection. Thus, 'detachment is made easier by the use of technical jargon that disguises the real nature of what is going on' (Singer, 1990, p. 50). An example of this is

“dressing” which is used to refer to ‘the process of removing various parts of the body of an animal following slaughter’ (Ford et al., 2012). This language enables people to retain an emotional detachment from animals and accept the slaughtering of animals for food.

In MM and OI predators are referred to as a representative of a group or in the plural form and audience responses reflect this. For example, when a viewer refers to an animal in terms of species, they are also likely to highlight differences between humans and other animals. This is the case in the following comment:

“The whole meerkat love thing though is hard to think of, because meerkats don't love like humans do” (YouTube)

What is meant by the phrase ‘meerkats don’t love like humans do’ is unclear. It could mean meerkats do not love at all or it could mean meerkats love but in ways different to that of humans. In either case, meerkats are perceived as different from humans. By categorizing animal characters as a group or species, their individual traits are diminished. Moreover, group and species categorizations are often used by audience members to claim that animal characters are not like humans and thus do not possess the same emotions, motivations and behavioural tendencies. This underlines the importance of individualisation in enabling emotional responses to the characters. When animal characters are perceived as distinct individuals, audiences recognize their uniqueness, subjective experiences and emotions; yet when characters are discussed as a group or are unnamed, MM audiences frequently emphasize differences between them and humans:

“It's just a rat... Geez what drama for just 1 simple critter. As if there's no other... Maybe it's just the best DOCUMENTED rat, but not the best rat ever...” (YouTube)

“lol a rodent died it's life tons of these thing die all the time get over it” (YouTube)

The quotes above express a distant emotional relationship towards meerkats, and the animals are referred to in group terms. The individual meerkat is referred to as a ‘rat’ and ‘rodent’, and such categorizations indicate disinterest and disregard.

Furthermore, the use of the words ‘Geez’ and ‘lol’ signify ridicule and criticism of posters who have reported an emotional response to the animal character’s death. In addition, these comments convey a cynicism and a distancing from those who express emotional responses. Indeed, both quotes highlight the insignificance of this particular meerkat’s death. This type of response is found especially on the YouTube comment sections relating to MM and often include phrases such as ‘just an animal:

“People are shitting bricks about it, OMG FORBIDDEN ROMANCE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
It’s a bunch of fucking animals there isn’t such a thing as forbidden
romance!!!” (YouTube)

“haha about for this animal to die! I can imagine ppl [people] putting animals
higher than humans. We have ppl [people] dyeing all over the world make
tributes to the starving and homeless. WHAT HAS THIS WORLD COME
TO!?” (YouTube)

In the comments above the focus is on other posts and posters while most of the earlier quotes have been specifically about the animal characters. As the first comment demonstrates, the poster thinks the romantic aspects of MM are ridiculous, as the characters are ‘a bunch of fucking animals’. The phrasing ridicules viewers who respond emotionally to the narrativised romances between the animal characters. In addition, the second quote implies that human welfare should be put above that of animals; this view rests on a hierarchy in which humans are above animals and includes a distaste for emotional involvement with animals. These comments re-state the anthropocentric hierarchy between humans and other animals: meerkats are ‘just animals’ therefore they do not matter, at least not as much as humans. This re-statement happens in the context of the so-called species boundary between humans and animals being blurred or non-existent in some audience responses (Chapter 6).

It should be noted that responses that express criticism of those who show emotional connections to animals, and responses emphasise the existence of a human-animal boundary, are found only in audience responses to MM and on YouTube where disagreements are also found (Chapter 8). This highlights the specificity of the structure of YouTube which enables critiques of other posters and fosters a different, more excessive, mode of posting.

This discussion shows that the individualisation of animal characters is associated with audience responses expressing empathy and connection, while the pluralisation of animal characters is associated with emotional distance. Different ways of representing animals, therefore, have an impact on audiences' emotional responses. In Chapter 6, I showed that the death of animal characters is one of the most frequently talked about aspects of the programmes, and audiences often respond to deaths emotionally. Meanwhile, for many wildlife documentaries, audiences expect animal deaths, and they even attract audiences (Chris, 2006; Horak, 2006). Although both wildlife docu-soaps and other wildlife documentaries use death and violence to attract audiences, wildlife docu-soap audiences show both negative emotional responses towards animal deaths (see Chapter 6) and also cynicism toward audience members who express such emotions. These different responses, as well as being associated with individualisation, are also associated with different ways of categorising animals and I discuss this in the next section.

7.5: Animals as similar to humans or pets

In this section, I discuss the categorization of animals as similar to humans and pets which was widespread in audience responses. The attribution of so-called human characteristics to non-human animals is used in many wildlife documentaries and other types of media such as children's books (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000) and wildlife docu-soaps are no exception. This genre anthropomorphizes animal characters, and my evidence shows that anthropomorphism, as defined by Crist (2000), is also present in the way audience members perceive animals. I found that many posts, in both MM and OI communities, referred to the similarities between animals and humans.

“This show will have you seeing animals in a whole new way, seeing them way more like people than you could ever think possible!” (TV.com)

“It pulls you in and you really start to care about these little creatures.....as if they are somebody you know” (IMDb)

These quotes demonstrate a perception of animal characters as being like people. The first one comments on how the representations of animals in MM highlight similarities between animals and humans while the second one points out how they encourage an emotional, caring response. There is, however, a tension in the second response: ‘somebody’ is a word that is used for persons, usually human persons, and its use for meerkats blurs the categorical boundary between humans and animals emphasising their similarity. At the same time the meerkats are referred to as ‘little creatures’ which reasserts their difference and is in tension with the use of ‘somebody’.

This view of animal characters as persons is also reflected in the way they refer to animal characters as someone they are familiar with. For instance, they sometimes compare animal characters to someone they know, such as a family member, in terms of behaviours and personalities:

“She was smarter than my brother that’s for sure” (YouTube)

“LMFAO!!! [orangutans] reminds me of my ex haha and that goofy smile hahahah lmfaoh i love this show just like my kids” (YouTube)

These responses contain direct comparisons between the animal characters and human family members which could mean that the animals are seen to be like humans. In the second quote, however, ‘LMFAO’ is used which suggests that the comparison between the orangutan and their ex is a joke. Once again these comments are both on YouTube which is associated with more excessive posts and it is hard to know whether these comparisons are serious. Commonly, comparing people with animals is regarded as insulting to the human and this may well be what is intended here rather than a more straightforward acceptance of similarities between humans and animals.

It should be noted that the anthropomorphism evident in audience comments is already created by the programmes, particularly in the narration (Chapter 5). The narratives anthropomorphise the animals in order to develop the story and retain the interest of audiences and this is reflected in audience responses. The audience's strong emphasis on similarities between humans and animals is, thus, what they receive from the programmes. However, as I have shown, not all audience members accept this way of understanding animals, and some point out that the moral qualities of the animal characters are constructed through dramatic story-telling narratives and bear no relation to 'reality'.

While there are differences in audience responses, there are many where an acceptance that animals in general are similar to humans is evident. There are comments saying how similar animals are to humans and that they are 'actually people':

"It teaches you about animals that have pretty much the same issues as humans" (TV.com)

"They communicate like they are actually people, I can't believe how smart meerkats are" (TV.com)

Clearly, this audience member sees commonalities between humans and animal characters, and there are many similar comments about social issues, emotions, cognitive functions and characteristics, all of which are highlighted through the narration in the programmes. The responses above show that the viewing experience leads to a perception that animals have similar social issues and intelligence as humans. This is also clear in the following comment:

"Shakespeare sacrificed himself for the sake of the family, I didn't know animals were capable of doing that. He was a real hero I believe" (YouTube)

This example illustrates that the anthropomorphism and individualisation of animals in the programmes lead to an awareness of the commonalities between humans and non-human animals, which in turn connects to audience perceptions of the animal characters. In this

comment, Shakespeare's actions to save other family member are perceived as selfless and courageous, and he is described as 'a real hero'. The poster did not know such qualities existed in non-human animals before they watched the show, yet afterwards they recognize the commonalities between humans and animals. Anthropomorphism is frequently used in wildlife docu-soaps, as shown in Chapters 5 and 6, and this way of representing animals calls forth audience responses that accept the similarities between humans and animals. There are of course exceptions, as I have already discussed, which are critical of this mode of representation.

Many comments refer to the emotions of the animal characters, seeing them as similar to what they call 'human' emotions.

"Not only that you feel human emotions for these animals, and you can imagine them as having human feelings and talking almost human" (TV.com)

"[Mozart from MM is] Compassionate and caring, but also quite the "party" meerkat & always did as she chose even knowing the consequences"
(YouTube)

In the first quote the audience member comments that they can 'imagine' the animals having human feelings. Although they are not saying that the animals actually have human feelings, they can imagine that they do. This comment highlights how the programme encourages forms of imagination where animals and humans have a similar emotional life. They also comment that they can 'feel human emotions' for the animals which draws attention to the emotional responses associated with this form of imagining. The second quote uses the phrase 'party meerkat' which derives from 'party animal', often colloquially used to refer to humans who like to have fun. The word party is in inverted commas, though, and this suggests that it is being used ironically; it may show a wariness of using a word that could be seen as anthropomorphic and therefore not applicable to animals. Although party is in inverted commas, the quote still suggests a perception of similarities between humans and animals.

The perception of similarities is also evident in the way qualities which are commonly used to describe humans are applied to the animal characters. For example, the animals are often ascribed with qualities like compassion, lasciviousness, reliability, courageousness and loyalty through the narratives in the programmes, and such qualities are recognized and reproduced in audience responses.

“this [a tribute to Flower] is so beautiful, honouring a proud mother, leader, and mate. rest in peace, Desert Rose. the Kalahari will never be the same.”
(YouTube)

Other posts describe Flower as an ideal leader due to ascribed qualities such as confidence, stoicism, charisma, affection and bravery. In the quote above, Flower is described as “a proud mother, leader, and mate”, but such a perception is deeply connected to the qualities ascribed to Flower throughout the narrativised stories. This is not to say those qualities are uniquely human, but that they are used in the narration and assume similarities between humans and animals in a way that represents the animals as subjects leading meaningful lives.

Moreover, so-called human-like qualities of animal characters seem to be connected to the audiences’ emotional responses. I found that audience members express sympathy at the same time as referring to the human-like qualities of the animal characters. Such responses are often found in the MM communities:

“I never missed a moment ...can’t say how bad I feel. never knew such great person could go down like that. flower 4 life” (YouTube)

In the quote above, Flower is referred to as a ‘great person’. The term person, as I have already noted, is usually only applied to humans, but here it is used for Flower, reflecting a view that she, like humans, has the qualities of personhood.

As well as, anthropomorphising animals, some MM audience comments categorize animal characters as pets, and this also relates to viewers’ emotional responses:

“To me it was like watching a pet who is very sick slowly dying” (TV.com)

“I think they're getting upset because they've come to think of Flower as a pet. I think anyone would be upset if they're pet died” (YouTube)

The first quote talks about feeling sad watching Flower dying, which is likened to watching ‘a pet who is very sick slowly dying’. Here an analogy is drawn between Flower and a pet although the two are not regarded as the same. The second quote relates others’ ‘upset’ at Flower’s death with their categorizing her as a pet. These two quotes, while not necessarily saying meerkats are the same as pets, likens them to pets as a way of explaining viewers’ emotional reactions.

This likening of wild animals to pets serves to explain close emotional connections and grief at an animal character’s death. Emotional relationships between pets and their owners, as I noted in Chapter 2, are dependent on individualisation as are the emotional connections between viewers and animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps. Moreover, this categorisation of animal characters as ‘like’ pets or ‘like’ humans shapes audience perceptions of them (Sealey & Charles, 2013).

Additionally, the categorical ambiguity of the animal characters may be due to the status of wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre. While the animals are wild animals, they are also anthropomorphised and presented as if they were characters or personalities in soap opera and reality TV. Combined with individualisation, this particular mode of representation encourages audiences to perceive the similarities between animals and humans.

The discussion so far has focused on audiences’ categorisation of animal characters as similar to humans and/or pet animals or, conversely, as ‘just animals’. Although in both MM and OI there are instances of viewers regarding the animal characters as like pets or humans, these analogies are more often found in audience responses to MM and are associated with more emotional responses to the animal characters.

Bulliet (2006) argues that the increasingly empathetic attitudes characteristic of post-domesticity are targeted towards certain categories of animal and pets are his prime example. These categories have a common factor which is that the animals are recognised as distinct individuals with their own character traits. When animal characters are categorised as like humans or pets, their distinct personalities and emotions are recognised and their similarity to humans emphasised. The opposite effect is found when audiences categorize the characters as an example of a group: then the animal characters' individuality and emotions are denied, their difference from humans rather than their similarity is emphasized, and audiences show a more distant attitude towards them and are critical of viewers who show emotional connections to them. All these findings indicate the importance of individualisation and anthropomorphism in shaping audience responses, because the individuality of animals invites the audience to form an emotional relationship with the animal characters. How this can be conceptualised will be the focus of the next section.

7.6: Para-social relationships

In order to understand the relationship that audiences form with characters in soap opera and other TV programmes, the concept of para-social relationship has been developed (see Chapter 3). This concept is also useful for understanding the relationships between audiences and animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps. Indeed, signs of para-social relationships between the audience and the animals, such as discussing characters as if they are familiar and known and talking about forming relationships with them, are present in responses towards MM.

“Mozart was my favourite desert cat, because I felt for her when bad things kept happening to her, I happy for her when good things happened, I literally balled my eyes out when she died. I was just really invested in this little she-kat's life” (IMDb)

In the quote above, the comment that they ‘invested in this little she-kat’s life’ shows an emotional involvement and suggests that, through the viewing experience, audience members become familiar with the characters and their experiences, and that this facilitates

the formation of para-social relationships with them. For example, the quote above demonstrates the viewer's emotional response to the death of Mozart and expresses empathy and compassion for her when she faces difficulties or has good moments.

Moreover, I found that MM audiences explicitly express the wish to form a relationship with individual animal characters. For example, there are comments about desiring or imagining animal characters to be someone close, such as a family member, a friend or a romantic partner:

“Zaphod is my meerkat boyfriend” (YouTube)

“I want uncle Yossarian as my uncle lol” (YouTube)

These comments articulate a relationship (boyfriend) or the desire to have a relationship (uncle) with a specific character. The first statement signifies an emotional relationship while the second is less easy to interpret. This is because it uses ‘lol’ which suggests that the viewer is making a joke and therefore not necessarily expressing emotional closeness. The meaning is ambiguous, though, and the association of Yossarian with the kinship term ‘uncle’ signifies both a recognition of familial relations between the animal characters, and that the poster can imagine themselves relating to them in this way. Similarly, a desire to meet the animal characters is expressed widely in comments and indicates that audience members are personally involved with the animal characters. They may perceive characters as friends or family, through a process known as ‘transportation’ which refers to becoming emotionally involved in media products and being immersed in a story (Green & Clark, 2013; Green & Sestir, 2017). Stever (2013) comments that viewers may develop romantic feelings for characters and I found evidence of this amongst audience responses. Some viewers, as in the comment above, relate to particular animal characters as friends and romantic partners. In addition, they refer to them as if they are someone they personally know.

“Mozart I will be a friend of yours. Maybe you will find peace at last. I will miss you and will have to watch series one to not miss you so much. hope you

find out your mother will be there for you. i was not wanted so I know how you fell [feel]. a friend always” (YouTube)

“Watching these meerkats make them almost part of your family” (TV.com)

The first comment is addressed directly to Mozart rather than to other posters and echoes how people write when those close to them, including pets, have died; it implies a strong feeling of empathy on the part of the viewer and close identification with Mozart’s experience. Comments like this, which refer to animal characters as family or friends, were widely observed in the online communities and demonstrate viewers’ personal emotional involvement with the characters.

Comments not only reveal personal involvement but also the belief that humans can learn about relationships from how the animal characters behave:

“I must say again, I am not getting enough of this. Screw the politics, just be a warden. Care for the kids, no matter whose. Protect the non-combatants at all cost. Even if the price is your life. Humans should take heed of this meerkat's example” (YouTube)

“If you wanna know what a family is, just look at the Whiskers with Flower as DF [dominant female]. I've never seen a better family than the Whiskers. And if you wanna know what love is, look at Flower and Zaphod. They r what a love story is made of” (YouTube)

“this program offered me such comfort to see that the emotions and feelings -- the RELATIONSHIPS I desired to achieve with other human beings could really happen with these noble and affectionate creatures” (YouTube)

These comments accord with the argument that in post-modern cultures there is a view that animals are morally superior to humans (Franklin, 1999). In the comments above, aspects of the characters’ behaviour and relationships are admired and vested with moral worth. For instance, an extreme gesture of love towards offspring, such as sacrificing one’s life, is

admired. The first comment points to the value of taking care of others, using language such as ‘non-combatants’ which metaphorically presents the animals as if they are at war. This reflects MM’s use of militaristic language when describing fighting between different groups of meerkats (Chapter 5). The second quote is concerned with the ideal types of romantic love and family that are presented in the programmes and reproduces the language of the narration (Chapter 6). The third quote demonstrates a desire to have ‘relationships’ like those of the animal characters and expresses admiration for them. The way these sentiments are expressed are typical of YouTube and reveal an admiration for the way the animal characters relate to each other.

These findings are similar to those for audiences of other TV genres. For instance, soap opera viewers who are very involved with a programme often see characters and their lives through their own life experiences. Sood (2002) comments that ‘high levels of involvement with entertainment-education soap operas allow audience members to identify with, and evaluate, the soap operas in terms of their own lives and perceived realities’ (p. 166; Katz, Liebes, & Berko, 1992). I found such involvement in audience responses to wildlife docu-soap. Posters identify with and experience the same emotions as the animal characters. Conversely, Cummins and Cui (2014), find that audiences’ empathy towards (human) media persona in soap opera facilitates para-social relationships and my findings were similar. There were differences between MM and OI, however, and this sort of reaction was only evident in audience responses to MM. This could be due to MM sharing more with soap opera than OI which facilitates the development of para-social relationships.

It is also possible that long-term and constant viewing patterns are connected to the construction of a para-social relationship with the characters. Both MM and OI were broadcast over a long period of time and I found that many viewers followed the series from beginning to end. Indeed, many claim that they spent a large amount of time watching the programmes:

“Flower will defiantly be missed by her fellow meerkat family and all of us who spent most of our time watching her through good and bad times on Meerkat Manor” (YouTube)

In common with many others, this comment refers to Flower's death and how much she will be missed, but it also points to a high investment of time in watching the programme. This investment is connected to how much Flower will be missed. Others have also noted that para-social relationships are more likely to develop in a long-term viewing experience (Balasubranian et al., 2014). Additionally, the audience's knowledge of, and familiarity with, the characters gained through a long-term experience of viewing, may also encourage emotional involvement and feelings of intimacy. For instance, Eyal and Rubin (2003) comment: 'as we view a program, we become familiar with the persona by observing and interpreting the appearance, attitude, style, and behaviour of the performer' (p. 81).

Moreover, para-social relationships 'mediate short- and long-term emotional responses to depicted events and to characters themselves' (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991, p. 64; Klimmt et al., 2006; Xiang et al., 2016). As with human-based genres, my findings suggest that wildlife docu-soap audiences become personally involved and develop para-social relationships with the animal characters and that this is closely connected to their emotional responses.

7.7: Identification

Another response to characters is understood in terms of identification which, like para-social relationships, addresses emotional responses. Wildlife docu-soaps are character centred, and this encourages audiences to identify with the characters, as is the case with soap opera (Killborn et al., 2001). There is evidence in audience responses to MM and OI of identification with the animal characters which leads some audience members to vicariously experience their emotions and dramatic life events. For instance:

"Shakespeare was like me in Meerkat form...Shakespeare If I were you I would have done the same thing" (YouTube)

This comment is partly addressed to Shakespeare, one of the characters in MM, and also demonstrates identification with Shakespeare. It communicates an understanding of why Shakespeare did what he did and a feeling that Shakespeare was the poster 'in Meerkat form'. Identification is clearly part of this comment as one of its effects is to enable

audiences to feel as if an event is happening to them (Cohen, 2001). Indeed, strong identification is widely observed in MM audience responses:

“Nothing is more traumatizing than seeing yourself in a meerkat.. Then seeing her laying there dead... kinda makes you re-evaluate your life” (YouTube)

“Always been my favourite, he is just like me in so many ways” (YouTube)

These comments are strong statements of identification with the animal characters. Sometimes viewers refer to personality traits they share with the characters, as in the second quote, while the first quote, even considering the performativity and excess of comments on YouTube, highlights the emotional impact of identification. The individuality of the characters is also a factor which audiences respond to positively:

“She was the one who made the show so interesting, because her life was always so rough, and because she had an awesome personality” (YouTube)

Strong personalities and life events that make each individual animal unique ensure that audiences find the programmes interesting. Moreover, viewers can identify with the characters and the experiences they have in common, such as relationship problems. These findings are consistent with previous research on audience responses and identification. For example, Baym’s (2000) analysis of online posts in soap opera fan communities in the 1990s demonstrates that audiences try to understand characters’ actions and inner states through their own life experiences. Similarly, Sood (2002) finds that when audiences identify with characters, they are likely to relate their own experiences to those of the characters. This is evident in audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps when posters comment that they see themselves in the animals and feel empathy towards them.

I found that audience identification with animal characters is facilitated due to their being non-human. In other genres, similarities between viewers and media persona, such as gender, ethnicity and social class, can increase identification but they can also make identification more difficult (Slater & Rouner, 2002). These social characteristics, with the exception of gender which plays a key role in representations of the animal characters, are

not so relevant for animal characters in docu-soaps or their audiences. The absence of social factors other than gender leads audiences to identify more easily with animal characters, even though they are animals, or perhaps because they are. Indeed, Miller (2010) claims '[z]oomorphic images deflect our focus away from age, gender and ethnicity, inviting us to see ourselves in them' (p. 79-80). This encourages audience members to identify with the animal characters which they can without being distracted by social factors such as class and ethnicity.

It should be noted that identification with the animal characters is more frequent in MM than OI communities. This point connects to my findings on para-social relationships and relates to MM's narrativised, episodic stories and strong characterisation which are similar to soap opera and are associated with similar audience responses.

7.8: Conclusion

This chapter discussed audiences' emotional responses to animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps. I showed that the individualisation of animal characters is reflected in audience responses, where animal characters' names and personalities are frequently mentioned, and is connected to a range of emotional responses including love, hate and empathy. This is contrasted to the more distanced emotional response to animals, such as predators, who are referred to in group rather than individual terms. The individualised animal characters are also seen as similar to humans and pets by some audience members and sometimes their pet-like status and their naming are used to explain emotional attachment. Finally, this chapter looked at how audience responses can be understood through concepts such as para-social relation and identification.

One of the important findings is that individualisation is key to emotional responses and connections with the animal characters on the part of audiences; this is consistent with other research that shows individualisation of animals is associated with feelings of empathy towards them (Morton, 2002; Akerman, 2019). I have shown that individualisation happens in various ways including through naming, the attribution of personality, and the use of anthropomorphism. Each animal character has a name that audiences recognize and they are represented as having unique personalities. The personal

qualities of the animal characters are connected to audience perceptions that each animal character is unique and distinctive, and therefore they are individuals with their own subjective experiences. The use of anthropomorphic language facilitates the perception amongst audience members that the animal characters share similarities of behaviour, feelings and social organisation with humans and/or pets and that the emotions viewers feel for them are similar to those felt for pets. The personalities of the animals and the qualities attributed to them through the narration also encourage audiences to identify with them and see themselves in the characters. The anthropomorphic language blurs the categorical boundary between humans and other animals that is constructed within Western thought. On the other hand, my findings also indicate that when animals are referred to as a group, members frequently deny characters' emotions and autonomy. The role of narrators is also significant in relation to audience responses and, as I showed in Chapters 5 and 6, textual elements are important in encouraging particular audience responses. It is through the narration that animal characters are individualised and anthropomorphised. The narrator interprets the images for viewers, giving meanings to them which audiences may accept or reject. The narrators tell viewers what each character is like, what they are called and explains emotions and motivations. Without the narration, individualisation would not be accomplished, hence, this highlights the significant role of the narrator in relation to the audiences' emotional responses.

Another important finding is that there are similarities between audiences' responses to wildlife docu-soaps and other genres. The character centred and dramatic event focused stories of wildlife docu-soaps are shared with other genres such as soap opera and reality TV. These structural similarities are associated with similar audience responses which can be conceptualised in terms of para-social relationships and identification, concepts which have been developed for programmes which are not based on animals. Thus audiences in my research form para-social relationships with and identify with the animal characters, and vicariously experience their life events. I argue that they can do this more easily than with other genres because of the reduced relevance of social markers due to the animal-ness of the characters. Similar responses to soap opera and reality TV have been noted (e.g. Geraghty, 1991; Sood, 2002; Ang, 2013; Briggs, 2010). These findings demonstrate that wildlife docu-soaps elicit emotional responses that are similar to other genres and, because of this, the concepts developed to analyse audience responses to other genres can also be applied to audience responses to wildlife docu-soap.

Having explored the way that audiences respond emotionally to animal characters and how this is influenced by the way animal characters are represented, in the next chapter I turn my attention to how online communities shape audience responses and how media literacy is developed.

Chapter 8: Online communities

In the previous two chapters, I discussed how the narratives in wildlife docu-soaps shape audience responses and how audiences' emotional responses are closely related to the human-interest stories, the individualisation of the animal characters and the anthropomorphic language of the narration. This chapter turns its focus to online communities and media literacy, specifically exploring how online communities shape audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. It is important to explore this because online communities provide an important forum not only for discussion of wildlife docu-soaps but also for the development of a critical perspective that contributes to developing the skills of media literacy. Much has been written about how the development of the internet and the emergence of online communities change not only the way audiences express their opinions, but also how they enjoy media products (Bechman & Lomborg, 2013; Bruns, 2008). For instance, online communities make it possible for audiences to share opinions and information about television programmes, to interact with others (McKenna et al., 2002) and to be heard by people who previously would not have heard them, such as producers (Jenkins, 2006; Falero, 2016). They also allow audiences to develop a critical perspective on the programmes and to comment on them at the time they are broadcast from wherever they live in the world.

In this chapter, I argue that online communities have a significant role in shaping audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps: they provide space for audiences to discuss meanings, express their emotions, exchange information and develop a collective understanding of the programmes as well as providing an educational function. I explore how audiences express their sense of belonging to the communities and how the platforms differ in the type of community they facilitate. Online spaces allow people with similar interests to gather and communicate regardless of their geographical location. Audiences not only respond to the programmes but also interact with each other and share fan-created content; in this process they develop a critical perspective which can be understood as media literacy. They also share knowledge about the research with which the programmes are associated. All these exchanges generate collective understandings of the programmes and the animals that are their subjects. As I will show in this chapter, wildlife docu-soaps do not exist on their own and MM and OI are linked to various para-texts such as websites,

books, and research projects¹¹. This chapter highlights how audiences compare, evaluate and share different sources of information and in the process develop media literacy.

8.1: Sharing emotions and a sense of community

Audiences communicate about various aspects of wildlife docu-soaps and in this section I show how participants in online communities share an interest in the programmes and an emotional connection to the animal characters as well as how they express their sense of belonging. My research focused on three different platforms: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube, each of which has a different structure (Chapter 4). IMDb hosts reviews only and there is no interaction between posters so this discussion focuses on TV.com and YouTube, both of which facilitate interaction amongst users. TV.com has stronger community aspects than YouTube; audience members on TV.com are more likely to be already fans of the programme and more friendly interactions are observed than on YouTube. On TV.com both MM and OI viewers express their emotions. This is illustrated in the following conversation threads:

“I like Orangutan Island. Do you?”

“I do too. I just started to watch the show, and I'm getting to know about the different orangutans” (TV.com)

Also:

“I was just wondering if there were any Australian viewers who watch this great show. We are up to the 4th/5th episode and this is an outstanding show!”

“Yes I watch this show...it kicks ass! It so interesting and funny lol n I love the meerkats, they're too cute”

¹¹ While MM has a linked Animal Planet website, the research website, the book written by the lead researcher and related films, OI only has an Animal Planet website.

“Yay, I’m not the only one, I know, they are so adorable and interesting!”
(TV.com)

On TV.com anyone is allowed to start a new conversation and reply to messages and the forum is often used to seek out other fans, as demonstrated by the extracts above. The use of phrases such as ‘do you?’ and ‘I was wonderin...’ invite others to join in the conversation. Mutual interest in the programmes are an important aspect of audience interactions online. Indeed, the animal characters and the content of the wildlife docu-soaps are the main topic of conversation. Others have observed that communications in online communities arise from mutual interests and knowledge of particular activities (Kozinets, 1999; Ridings & Gefen, 2004) and that online communities consist of people who are similar to each other (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Yan et al., 2016). For the wildlife docu-soap communities in my research, the identities of the posters are not known so I cannot comment on their similarities; the only known commonality with each other is their mutual interest in a particular wildlife docu-soap.

Some audience members express excitement to find others who are interested in and enthusiastic about the animal characters. They often talk about individual characters and share how they feel about them as in the conversation below.

“OMGGG I’m crying!!! ♥Rocket Dog♥ <333”

“Believe me, I know how you feel judrop [user name]!” (YouTube)

In this thread, there is an exchange of feelings about Rocket Dog who died in an episode of MM. The intimacy of this exchange is highlighted by the second poster referring to the first one by their user name. The sharing of emotions also occurs when animal characters do something funny and viewers write ‘haha’ or ‘lol’ to share their amusement with others. Such exchanges of emotion are often associated with discussions of dramatic aspects of the story line and viewers talk about those that particularly attract their attention.

“People thought I was crazy because I cried when I saw that Flower and my other favourites died. But I don’t have to defend myself to them because I love the meerkats. And on this website we share the same feelings, and I know that I am not the only one that cried when our beloved meerkats died. I miss them all” (YouTube)

These quotes show that the posters tried to express their emotions off-line, but they felt ‘silly’ and others thought they were ‘crazy’. Such statements demonstrate the specialness of the online communities for them, creating a space where they can freely express emotions that they cannot express elsewhere, even though, as I have shown, there are some posters who are critical of emotional responses (Chapter 7). They feel safer in online space than they do offline and are able to share their thoughts and experiences with others. Indeed, Maliepaard (2017) finds that sharing experiences is significant in providing an online safe space and Lucero (2017) shows that marginalised people find it easy to explore and express their identities online. These responses to wildlife docu-soaps are consistent with Wellman and Guila’s (2005) claim that people use online forums to find social support and a sense of belonging, as they can interact with others with similar feelings. Especially when viewers cannot find anyone offline to share their viewing experiences, online communities act as significant places for them to freely express emotions and exchange views about the animals and fosters a sense of belonging.

The platforms differ in the type of community they facilitate and the sorts of exchanges that characterise them. For example, responses from IMDb contain no interactions as IMDb only allows viewers to post reviews which are often longer than comments on TV.com and YouTube, both of which enable audience interaction. The type of interaction on these two platforms differs. On TV.com there is a high level of interaction between the posters who ask each other questions such as ‘where do you live’ or ‘which character do you like’. This interaction and posters’ attachment to the programmes enables a close community to develop. Moreover, the interactions on TV.com are usually friendly and there are no offensive or violent exchanges. In addition, participants have to actively search for the page by typing ‘TV.com Meerkat Manor’ on a search engine or typing ‘Orangutan Island’ on the in-website search function. This narrows down who engages in the TV.com communities to those who have a prior interest in the programmes. In contrast, on YouTube, as I showed in Chapter 7, there are aggressive and critical interactions. This

may be because people can come across MM or OI related videos by accident (such as recommended videos shown on the side of the page when you play any video), so random people who are not fans of the programmes may post comments. Also, YouTube comments focus more on emotional responses to the programmes and the animal characters, with exchanges such as ‘I like Cha Cha’ followed by ‘me too’, and, as I have shown, expressions of emotion on YouTube are often excessive and written in a distinctive style. These differences between interactions in the online communities show that interactions are shaped by the structures and practices of the different platforms which, in turn, shape audience responses.

8.2: Fan-created content on YouTube

Having explored the ways that online communities enable fans to share their enthusiasm and express their emotions, and some of the differences between communities on the different platforms, this section looks at viewers as fans with a focus on audience responses to fan-created content on YouTube. Wildlife docu-soap communities can be conceptualised as fan communities, and, likewise, audience members online can be classified as fans (with the possible exception of some posters on YouTube). I discussed how fans are defined in Chapter 3, and, in this thesis, I use the definition proposed by Jenkins (2006) which emphasises involvement with activities and engagement beyond just watching programmes, including participating in communities and interacting with others. Jenkins, Ito and Boyd (2017) discuss the reasons people engage in such online activities. While they agree these differ with different people, they suggest that they can be divided into two categories: friendship driven and interest driven. Friendship driven focuses on social connection with others and a sense of belonging, and interest driven emphasizes developing and exploring tools and techniques online. Fans, they argue, go further to ‘geek out’ to gain more specialized knowledge and improve their skills.

The audiences of MM and OI that are the focus of this thesis fit this definition as they actively engage with online activities, interact with each other and express their opinions, and some go further to gain more knowledge about the wildlife docu-soaps. Joining online communities and interacting with other members can be understood as participatory fan activities (Chapter 3). Through such activities, audience members enrich their viewing

experiences. One of the ways they do this is by creating online videos of their favourite characters through combining and editing videos, photos and footage from the programmes and various other websites. Technological developments enable audience members to edit and publish their own content to suit their interests. This shows the interest driven side of participation which involves audience members practising their editing skills and uploading their videos online (Jenkins, Ito & Boyd, 2017). Such content is observed on YouTube, due to its nature as a video-sharing platform, and my findings show that audiences enjoy such fan created contents. An example of a fan-created video for wildlife docu-soaps can be found on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lMjDHtEcc8>). It is titled ‘Meerkat Manor: Flower - Firework ♥’, and is a tribute made by one of the fans, calling themselves MeerkatGal, who made several videos related to MM. The image below is a screen shot of the video.

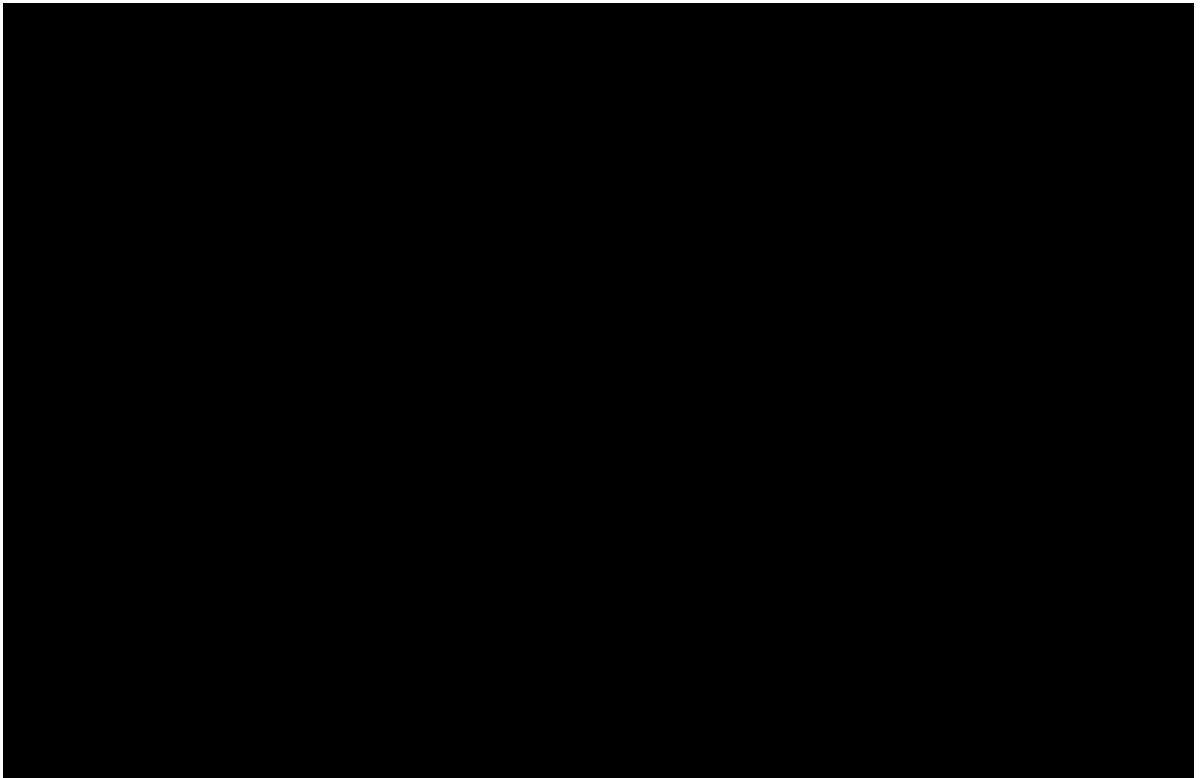


Figure 6: Screen shot of a fan created video on YouTube

In the comment section, there are interactions between the video creator and others and posters express their enjoyment. These fan-created videos often receive comments from other posters including compliments and encouragement to produce more videos. Some posters are recognized as established creators of such videos due to the number they produce, and because others often interact with them:

“Beautifully video!!! Love itt.<333333333 I miss Mozart and Wilson....thanks for posting again” (YouTube)

“Thank you & your welcome! I miss them both also! I make these vids for loyal fans like yourself Sophie! Take care” (YouTube)

In the quotes above, the comment ‘thanks for posting again’ indicates that the person posting is familiar with the creator and their previous videos while the creator’s response refers to them as a ‘loyal fan’ of the programme. Both share an emotional attachment to Mozart and Wilson and miss them.

The sharing of fan-created videos and the interactions which arise from viewing them make evident that these audience members are fans and shows what their fan activities consist of. In addition, this exchange highlights how mutual interest in the programme acts as a catalyst for interactions and confirms that shared interests are at the heart of online communities. Here is another interaction between the creator of a fan video and someone who has watched it:

“Thanks :) You're an amazing friend too :) And a great editor!”

“No problem at all! And thank you too! n_n”

“Awww haha <333 It was no problem at all, you deserve it! :3 *hugs back* You're a great friend <3” (YouTube)

This exchange demonstrates friendly relations between the creator and viewer of the video. The viewer refers to the creator as ‘an amazing friend’, and the use of phrases like ‘hugs back’ and emoticons like ‘<3’ highlight the friendliness of the interaction. Indeed, forming friendships is a popular motive for people to join online communities (Horrigan et al., 2001), especially for adolescents (Gross et al., 2002). I found that emoticons are used on YouTube but rarely on TV.com and IMDb and reflect both the conventions of the platform and the tenor of the communications.

These exchanges among audience members show both interest driven and friendship driven participation (Jenkins, Ito and Boyd, 2017). Some upload videos on YouTube which require technical knowledge and practical skill, and such videos are also a catalyst for social interactions and the development of a sense of belonging. Jenkins, Ito and Boyd (2017) comment that people can move between these types of participation fluidly, and my findings suggests that audience members not only move through but also embody both types of participation.

8.3: Information exchange in online communities

This section explores the exchange of information in online communities which helps audiences fill gaps in the story-lines and biographies of characters and enriches their viewing experience. Indeed, I found that audiences frequently ask questions and exchange information about specific individual characters.

“What happened to Hannibal?” (YouTube)

“Wasn't it Daisy who slipped away when all the others were foraging? She slipped into the burrow and killed Flowers pups? Is this right?” (YouTube)

“I missed the first two episodes of the second series, and have just seen the next two where they have stated that Big Si is dead, and the Lazuli are leaderless. Did they say how it happened? (Incidentally we're only up to 2.4 in the UK although the shows are shown in pairs so we catch up fast. Don't spoil me please)” (TV.com)

As the programmes are episodic and broadcast over a long time period, some viewers miss an episode or sometimes a whole season, but they are still eager to know what has happened to particular characters. Furthermore, they seek reassurance that their understanding of a programme or event is shared by others. This is the case in the second comment which ends with ‘is this right?’.

Audiences also exchange information about the dramatic aspects of the story-line and often ask each other about whether characters are still alive. This exchange took place on YouTube.

“What happened to Youssarion and Tosca are they still alive”

“As sad as it is, Tosca has probably died over the harsh winter when she was evicted. Youssarian I believe was attacked by Lazuli males when roving. I not sure if he is dead though, just missing”

“Oh ok I was just curious”

“Is Shakespeare dead or alive?” (YouTube)

These questions relate to viewers’ emotional attachment to animal characters; they ask about specific, named characters, wanting to know what has happened to them. OI audiences, because the show ended without saying what happened to the orangutans after they were moved to a new island, ask each other for information.

The exchange of information about individual characters is associated with the expression of emotions, such as love, hate and sympathy. For instance, posters show emotional responses when asking or answering a question about animal characters who have died:

“You know what I don't know why Hannibal is the leader of the commandos. But I really miss Flower. Plus Mozart, Kinkajou, Whoopy and all of the Starsky died as well” (YouTube)

In this comment, the viewer is answering a question about whether Hannibal died but the quote also contains an emotional remark: ‘I really miss Flower’. This demonstrates that information exchanges not only share information but also express emotions. Also, the phrase ‘you know what I don’t know why...’ with which the post begins is conversational, and invites others to join in. Thus, audiences interact through asking questions and giving information about the programmes and the characters and interactions often include the expression of emotions.

These findings suggest that audiences not only share emotional remarks but also exchange information about the programmes and animal characters online in order to find out what happens to particular characters and fill in gaps in the story. Online communities also fulfil an educational function which is the topic of the next section.

8.4: The educational value of online communities

In this section I focus on the educational value of the exchanges that take place within online communities and argue that the communities work as an online learning environment. Indeed, questions are frequently asked about animals and wildlife in general and answers are provided by others. This is not to say that all the answers are correct nor that the exchanges of information are necessarily educational. As I show later in the chapter, when responding to questions and providing information, posters often refer to other information sources, para-texts, which they believe are based on knowledge and expertise. These include the research website associated with MM and are discussed later in the chapter. Here I focus on the types of questions that are asked.

Some audience members ask questions about habitats and the behaviours of the animals:

“Hi everyone. I have two main questions about how tough meerkats are. The first is what age would a meerkat be expected to reach living in the wild in a good group? Second, are meerkats immune to scorpion poison? If not don't they take a really big risk every time they try to eat as scorpion stings can be deadly even to humans” (TV.com)

“Why do meerkats find those types of places so attracting?” (YouTube)

“Are meerkats related to possums?” (YouTube)

“Is it really a "huge blow" to the group when a pup dies? Does their behaviour really change or do they just realize there is more food available?”(YouTube)

These comments demonstrate that the posters want to know more about the animals who are the subjects of the programmes and that this search for knowledge is directed at other audience members who often provide answers. Furthermore, MM audiences often ask questions about the scientific research that the programme is associated with. The comments below about tracking collars demonstrate this point.

“The collar isn't a symbol of dominance, though they like to put the collar on dominant animals, because the subordinates will follow them. The researchers only use the collars to find the group. They can go on either the DF [dominant female] or the DM [dominant male]. Sometimes they've even been on subordinates! So the collar doesn't mean dominance” (TV.com)

“Meerkats like Flower wear the 'radio collars' because they are most likely to be in charge of the group. It isn't necessarily the dominant female that wears the collar, as shown with Hannibal and then Carlos. They are easy to get on by the back of the collar is a small latch sort of device which firmly holds it on their neck. It can also be unattached easily by a certain process. People often think that the Collars can choke the meerkats, but there has not been obvious evidence. If you looked closely at Flower, Rocket Dog, Monkulus, Zaphod, Hannibal, Lola, Punk, Carlos, Tosca and Cazanna you can see their radio collars are slightly loose to prevent them being choked. Even if they get bitten like Flower or Rocket Dog, they don't choke the meerkat and they aren't affected in any way” (TV.com)

Information about the research project is rarely provided in MM so if viewers want to know more about it they ask each other. In contrast, OI is based on a conservation facility, so audiences' questions often relate to conservation issues and how the facility is run. This marks a difference between MM and OI regarding audience responses.

Some responses indicate that viewers have found the programmes inspirational:

“It is like coming back to my childhood when I was so addicted to meerkat manor. MM inspired me in many ways. That's mostly because of meerkats that now I am studying veterinary medicine and I am so enthusiastic about nature!

MM will live on in our hearts forever. I hope they would make more inspiring stories like this!” (YouTube)

This comment demonstrates that MM has had a profound influence in terms of this viewers’ choice of profession. Furthermore, several comments include a link to a petition related to conservation issues. These examples indicate that wildlife docu- soaps can have implications beyond themselves: in the first case in affecting the job choice of a fan and, in the second, facilitating the sharing of an interest in conservation. This discussion shows that fans share information about wildlife and conservation and that online communities operate as a learning environment which may impact on audiences’ knowledge and actions in relation to wildlife.

8.5: Discussions and arguments

Exchanges of information are not the only form of interaction taking place in the forums. Sometimes arguments and disagreements develop which is especially the case for YouTube exchanges. YouTube has many functions for users, and one of them is ‘a virtual coffee house where people can share ideas and gather with likeminded and contrasting individuals to discuss ideas, art, and music’ (Cayari, 2011, p. 9). Indeed, YouTube is a social network site which leads the users to participate in social interactions through videos (Burgess, 2014). I found that responses on the YouTube site contain discussions and sometimes arguments about MM and OI and their characters.

For instance, as we have seen (Chapter 6), audiences frequently discuss their views on human intervention. While they disagree over certain issues, they also share similar values and opinions. For instance, despite some who disagree, a belief that animals have emotions and feelings is widely accepted.

“All you have to do is look at her face & see that she has emotions. I just can't believe that some people out there think that we are the only animal that has emotions in this world. This, in my opinion said that animals do have emotions too. Just like we do” (YouTube)

“Flower does show a whole lot of beautiful emotions. Doesn’t she, sklurch [user name]? Just like the rest of them. All though you do know that she is actually a Meerkat?” (YouTube)

As well as agreeing that animals have emotions, these posters are inviting responses from each other. The second poster addresses the first by name and ends with a question. This could be read as inviting a further response but it can also be read as ironic, implying that there is a contradiction between emotions and meerkats and reminiscent of the ‘just an animal’ response. Such exchanges of opinions and shared ideas are widespread in audience interactions online and help to build a sense of community.

Audience interactions can be friendly and calm but also there are disagreements and arguments between audience members, especially on YouTube. These can be quite hostile and tend to make use of aggressive expressions and language. Posters argue about various aspects of the characters’ lives and about the programmes themselves. For instance, some viewers harshly criticize others for misspelling names:

“Wolfgang Mozart's last name Mozart or Motzart? All u need to do is take out the 1st T, it’s not going to kill you. And people will be happy if u change or say you’re sorry. You didn't need to start the civil war again” (YouTube)

“it’s so dumb to miss spell something as easy as "Mozart"” (YouTube)

“No big si is spelled big si u stupid pee brain if u don’t no how to spell then don’t say anything at all” (YouTube)

Arguments such as these are aggressive and emotional. For instance, here one poster calls another ‘stupid pee brain’ because they have misspelled a character’s name. Ironically, while viewers are critical of the misspelling of characters’ names, other types of misspelling, such as general spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, are not criticized or even pointed out. For example, in the quote above, the poster is highly critical of others’ misspelling of ‘Big Si’, while they themselves misspell ‘pea brain’ as ‘pee brain’. This concern about how characters’ names are spelled may be due to an attachment to

individual characters, discussed previously in Chapter 7, as it clearly does not reflect a concern about spelling in general. On the other hand, it could also be a display of expertise and an assertion of superior knowledge. The magnitude of some of these arguments is highlighted in the first comment where they are referred to as ‘civil war’.

In addition, arguments frequently occur between viewers who are emotionally attached to animal characters and those who are critical of such attachment. As we saw in Chapter 7, viewers who are not emotionally involved with the animal characters, or who think that such involvement is inappropriate, ridicule and criticize those who are. Here I want to highlight the way these discussions develop. The quotes below are part of a long, argumentative string on this topic.

“I’m amazed how attached I’ve gotten to a bunch of meerkats, I’ve watched meerkat manor for years now, and I will really miss flower, she was amazing, a great leader, partner and parent. I never thought I’d say this about a meerkat but god bless and rest in peace”

“Same here :(I have the Meerkat manor movie so I got to see how Flower and Zaphod met. And when Flower's sister was killed by a cobra I almost cried!”

“Guys...No offence or anything but this happened 3 years ago...I think we gave it a break with this stuff...it’s like the World Trade Centre... 9 years and people still overreact about it...They stopped the series for a reason...When a main character dies in real life...if you can’t find a replacement you may as well stop the show and its harder with animals...anyways that’s about it from me...Freakin typos again...I meant to say "I think we need to give this stuff a break"

“You know what Kitty cat I don't give a crap if you think we are overreacting than don't watch the stinking video. We watch it because we are devoted fans so why don't you just shut the heck up! In case you didn't know on 9/11 we pay tribute to all of the people who died and if you didn't know that that's pretty darn sad too bad for you!” (YouTube)

The argument between these 3 posters heats up, and they become quite aggressive and emotional while defending their feelings about the animal characters against the charge of over-reaction. The third quote compares what the poster sees as emotional over-reaction to the death of a meerkat to a similar overreaction to 9/11, and justifies their position by pointing out that both events happened years ago. They are uncomfortable with this sort of emotional response whether it relates to human or animal deaths. The fourth comment denies any over-reaction and counters with an observation about tributes which indirectly legitimates their emotional reaction to MM. It is significant that a meerkat death carries the same emotional weight as 9/11 in this exchange on both sides of the argument. There is no resolution to the argument, but underpinning it is agreement that events in the world of MM are equivalent to events on the world political stage. This extract shows that online communities do not only include friendly exchanges but also quite hostile disagreements reflecting a range of views. These disagreements are, however, established on the basis of shared assumptions about the relation between the MM meerkats and other dramatic events which are mediated.

The finding that audience members are critical of each other is in tension with the finding that viewers experience online spaces as somewhere safe where they can express their emotional responses. It seems, however, that, despite disagreements, viewers still experience online space as safe. This is because arguments are often between those who are emotionally attached to the animal characters and those who are not, and viewers who are attached to the animal characters support each other. This type of argument, as I said earlier, mainly happens on the YouTube comment sections and not on the TV.com forums, but both spaces are regarded as 'safe' by posters. YouTube has a larger number of comments than TV.com, especially for MM where I found most arguments, and Jenkins (2006) observes that a bigger online community may not necessarily share the same beliefs, practices or goals. This may partly explain the greater prevalence of arguments on YouTube in the MM communities when compared with TV.com or the OI communities on both platforms.

8.6: Media literacy

Having explored the way viewers interact in online communities, I now turn my attention to how audiences' media literacy is expressed through critical approaches to the programmes. Media literacy enables audiences to critically analyse and judge the information they receive, rather than taking it at face value. Such critical thinking is important for wildlife docu-soap audiences as they receive a range of messages from the programmes, other community members, and para-texts. Moreover, these messages might influence their reading of the programmes, which in turn affects their responses to wildlife docu-soaps.

I have chosen to categorise audience responses as either critical or uncritical in order to investigate their media literacy further. For instance, a comment which critically analyses the effects of narratives on audience members' emotional responses is categorized as critical while a comment which accepts the programmes at face value, such as 'everything in Meerkat Manor is true', is categorized as uncritical. My findings suggest that viewers are critical of the representations of animals in the programmes and question their 'truth'. For instance, some comment on the editing and the narratives:

"The TV show doesn't always tell true things, some of the stories in the show were made up" (YouTube)

"They are wild animals sure there is some tricky editing to make the story"
(TV.com)

"Meerkat Manor often re-arranged or even made up events to make the story-line easier to follow or more dramatic" (TV.com)

"Show somethings obviously but not all We all know that the makers change things around to fit into a story" (TV.com)

These comments highlight audiences' awareness that stories require crafting in order to make them coherent and interesting. Also, the second response connects wild animals with 'tricky' editing which highlights their understanding that filming animals does of itself not make a story but editing does. These comments show an insight into how the programmes are made.

Similarly, the effect of narratives on audience perceptions of animal characters is also discussed:

“Bill Nighy [the narrator of MM in the UK] words which has personified them or you can just see you and your family personalities within them”¹² (TV.com)

“Obviously the narration is written using emotive language to make us attribute characteristics to certain Meerkats that they don't necessarily have like when they say 'sneaky Youssarian' or go on about Shakespeare being brave (I think he is but that's not the point). Sometimes I doubt the interpretations that they give of their behaviour” (TV.com)

These comments suggest that viewers are aware that the personalities and qualities of the animal characters are created through dramatic narratives and the second quote explicitly questions the way animal behaviours are interpreted. Such comments demonstrate a critical approach to the programmes and the way they represent animals but being critical does not amount to not enjoying the programmes. While the way personal qualities are attributed to the animal characters is critically evaluated, viewers also perceive the narrative as entertaining because it 'adds more personality' and makes it easier for viewers to identify with the characters.

¹² Different narrators may influence audience responses differently though, in my research, there is not enough data to examine such differences. Also, I do not know which versions viewers watched.

“I actually like the commentary, it adds more personality to the show I personally think, since I know orangutans are really smart, it doesn't make them sound stupid for me” (YouTube)

These comments show that viewers do not passively accept what is presented to them in the programmes, but critically evaluate and understand how particular representations of animals might influence them. They also highlight the tension in audience responses between criticism and enjoyment. Being critical is not necessarily connected to negative evaluations of the programmes, but to an understanding of the genre's conventions, the structure of the programmes and the effects of particular narratives. This is shown in another comment:

“I love how they dramatized this to make it appear that someone did care for Mozart in the last moments of her life and this one episode gave Wilson some good character development that was sadly lost in the 4th season” (YouTube)

Here, the dramatization and character development are perceived favourably and the poster's awareness of these techniques reveals that they recognise the reality presented in the programmes is constructed in particular ways. At the same time they 'love' how the programme does this. The narratives are also criticised:

“Season 2 seems darker than Season 1 (many unhappy endings!) What happened in the episode "Young Blood" from last Friday was a prime example. They seemed to have kicked up the shock value. Anyone agree?” (TV.com)

This quote shows that audience members sometimes criticize the wildlife docu-soaps' dramatic and emotional stories as having too much 'shock value'. This reflects a view that the deaths in season 2 are there simply to attract. These findings demonstrate that audiences critically evaluate the programmes and are aware of how the programmes' reality is constructed; such evaluations and criticisms indicate their critical media literacy skills.

The anthropomorphism of the programmes also attracts critical comments. For instance, several audience members comment on the anthropomorphic representations of animals in the programmes, some positively and some negatively.

“Being constantly reminded of the countless books of talking anthropomorphic animal characters that speckle our childhood; I am ecstatic at the thought of my cousins being able to see, for real, what those books try to do: "humanizing" the actions of the animal kingdoms” (TV.com)

In the quote above, the viewer is aware that both children’s books and wildlife docu- soaps use anthropomorphism, and they respond favourably to this as they perceive wildlife docu-soaps as a live action version of children’s books. Their comment also highlights the view that the anthropomorphic story-lines are fictional—just like humanized animals in children’s books. However, other comments are more negative and critical of the use of anthropomorphism:

“That script is awful... fake humanising of a very well made, sometimes brutal story” (YouTube)

“I'm disappointed that this is presented as a documentary, because it is not...But even most of the story is not real, because it imagines what the meerkats are thinking, even more than the series did, and attributes all kinds of magical and religious thoughts to them” (IMDb)

The first comment criticizes the narration as ‘fake humanising’ which suggests that they think the programme overdraws similarities between humans and other animals. The second quote reflects disappointment with the programme’s anthropomorphism which leads the viewer to perceive the story as ‘not real’ and the programme as not a documentary. This reflects their belief that meerkats do not think in the way the programme invites audiences to imagine. Those who perceive wildlife docu-soaps as documentaries often criticize their dramatic and emotional narratives, and their use of anthropomorphism. Such criticisms are more frequently found in MM online communities and relates to the way anthropomorphism is used to create its soap opera-like story-line.

OI, in contrast, narrates animals' behaviours in a way which is not perceived as anthropomorphic by audiences. Also, the comment above highlights audiences' expectation and perceptions of the genre. Disappointment that the story is 'not real' is expressed and is connected to the poster's perception of wildlife docu- soaps as documentary.

How characters are represented is also criticized by viewers:

"There are NO bad guys on the manor like the show portrays" (TV.com)

"No meerkat is mean, they do what they do to survive, I'm sure flower would be portrayed as mean if the focus was on the commando's" (YouTube)

"Truth is that if Animal Planet chose the Lazuli as their "main characters" Cazanna would be everyone's Kalahari queen and Flower would be turned into "the neighbours from hell" as Animal planet calls the other groups. Kinkajou is no different than Flower or any other meerkat" (YouTube)

These comments show a perception that the story and the narration shape the attribution of character and personality without any reference to the 'real' animal. For instance, in the first quote, there is an emphasis on 'NO', conveyed by capitalising the word, and the view that attributing moral virtues to meerkats is arbitrary. The second and third quotes also reveal the perception that it is the narrative that attributes character to individual meerkats. The third quote demonstrates an awareness that the moral qualities attributed to individual meerkats depend on what kind of role is assigned to them in the programmes. These viewers are critical of what they see as the lack of veracity of the characters and personalities of the meerkats in MM.

These discussions demonstrate that audiences make critical judgements about the representations of animals, and understand that the qualities of the animals are created through the narratives. Alongside this there is considerable criticism of the use of anthropomorphism; this relates mostly to MM which shares much with soap opera and has a more character-driven and dramatic story line than OI. This shows that the dramas

created by the narrative, although entertaining, can, at the same time, be criticised by viewers. These findings highlight the complexity of audience responses.

8.7: Para-texts

Audiences frequently use para-texts to gain information, inform others and back up their statements and, in this section, I explore how this use shapes their responses to wildlife docu-soaps. In the case of MM, the programme is linked to a scientific research project which has a website containing detailed information about the animals, such as their habitats and behaviours, as well as about the research project itself. Online articles, news websites and Wikipedia are also cited and viewers often direct others to sources they have found.

“According to the Friends of the Kalahari website. On February 12th, 2011, Zaphod was 4448 days old and set the record for the manor. He was born Dec. 9, 1998” (YouTube)

“There is a really interesting article about Meerkat Manor and meerkats in general found here [a link to an article]” (TV.com)

As the programmes do not convey all the information audiences want, they seek additional information online. They ask each other for specific information and provide it with reference to multiple information sources. Some audience members reference these information sources when talking about what happens in the programmes.

“I read that thing in the New Links saying that He may have been pick up by a Hawk. That’s what I think anyways” (TV.com)

“The Earthwatcher that I got the info from didn't say how she died. She said the following: Wiley Kat was found dead on the main road in May. =(“ (YouTube)

“just go on Wikipedia and look under the names of meerkats to know more info” (YouTube)

Multiple sources of information are especially used when audiences talk about specific characters and can support audience criticisms of the programmes:

“He got terribly false publicity - one thing I really detested about MM. Sure, it's great to give characters personalities, but many were completely ridiculous... like Youssarian- there was so much more to that beautiful 'kat than what the show depicted” (YouTube)

“he was after all the father of 2 of Flowers' litters. Kinkaju, Rocket Dog and Monkulus (Maybelline) were said to be Zaphod's daughters on MM but in reality (according to Tim Clutton-Brock's book, they were Yossarian's daughter and Zarathustra (Zorro) was Yossarian's son)...” (TV.com)

As we have seen, many viewers think that dramatic events are created to fit into the story, so they are keen to know what really happened to the animals, especially when there is a death involved. Several times, posters say that the programmes change the cause of death of a character in order to develop a story-line. This leads to an exchange of information about the actual cause of death and reinforces the view that the narrative is not ‘true’.

“Google Kalahari meerkats they got a Website. Rocket Dog is dead” (YouTube)

“According to the KMP book, shortly after recovering from his snake bite, Shakespeare disappeared. Most likely roving off. What happen to him beyond that is a mystery” (YouTube)

Audiences are also eager to know which character has died before it is revealed in the programme, and, in the case of MM, this is facilitated by the research website which sometimes publishes this information before the programme is broadcast. Some of the animals in MM, such as Shakespeare, are recorded as having ‘disappeared’ on the research website because he had left the fenced area which the research team stays within. He also vanished from the programme and viewers wanted to know what had happened to him. Especially for OI, audience members are keen to know what happened to the orangutans after the series ended, but Animal Planet does not provide any information about them since the unexpected ending of OI after Season 2. The way online communities talk about this is illustrated in the following exchange:

“Where did you find that out? I have been sending tweets to Lone Drauscher Neilson and others to find out about the gang, but never get any reply. I would like to read about them somewhere if you could point me in the direction to an article, please”

“I found the info on Lone's Facebook page (which is actually maintained and moderated by a friend of Lone's). Unfortunately, YouTube will not allow me to post the links to those pages. Go to Wikipedia and look at the "Orangutan Island" entry. The links to her Facebook page are in the footnotes, and look in the comments on those pages to see the info about their passing”

“Thank you so much for the info, I will take look. I don't know how to feel; happy for their chance at freedom but sad for their loss. Thanks again”
(YouTube)

The conversation above is between a viewer who is seeking information about the animal characters, and another who suggests where they can look for it. In such exchanges viewers help each other to find out what has happened to the animals and refer each other to a range of para-texts.

In addition, I found that viewers frequently use para-texts to support their emotional responses to the programmes and characters. For instance, Flower in MM ate another meerkat's pups. This was not in the programme but on the research website and several viewers reference it in order to justify their dislike for Flower. While there is a range of para-texts consulted by audiences, some are regarded as more trustworthy and authoritative than others and this is the focus of the next section.

8.8: Credible information sources

Critical judgements and media literacy are often dependent on the availability of para-texts to provide additional information about the programmes and the animals they feature, and the use of multiple sources enables audiences to develop their media literacy. As I will show, audiences are highly selective when it comes to information sources and different sources are perceived as more or less credible. As an example, Wikipedia is often criticized as an unreliable source of information:

“I don't trust Wikipedia as a source for valid information, so I checked the official website for verification” (TV.com)

“Just so ya'll no Wikipedia lies, a lot. and so does animal planet. Wikipedia just takes in rumours that aren't true” (YouTube)

Also, as in the quote above, Animal Planet websites relating to the programmes are criticized as less credible because they contain information which supplements the shows' narratives and corresponds to the way animal characters are represented in the programmes. Viewers are aware of this and, as a result, they think that the websites do not provide information about the real animals who feature as the characters in the programmes.

For MM communities, the book written by a lead researcher¹³ and the websites managed by the research group are perceived as credible sources of information:

“In the book it lists the facts not the MM stories (which is actually quite confusing to pick out from the real facts :/)” (TV.com)

“I think it’s possible that was a another lie by AP¹⁴ because on Tim's¹⁵ book about Flower (which is nothing but the truth)” (YouTube)

The research website and the book are based on scientific research, rather than narratives in the programmes, and some audience members perceive them as presenting the truth; by this they mean that the incidents described actually happened to the animals, rather than being constructed through the story. For OI, there are no websites other than the Animal Planet webpage, and it is more difficult for audiences to collect information about the orangutans. Some viewers comment that they frequently check the project leader, Lone Nielsen’s, Facebook page¹⁶ which is trusted because viewers believe that it is managed by Lone herself or someone who is close to her.

Information sources tend to be perceived as more reliable when they are linked to expert knowledge and are less biased (Brown et al., 2007). I found that audience members judge the credibility of information sources according to whether they present what viewers see as unbiased information and are competent and professional. Viewers, as I have shown, were often keen to find out whether the programmes told them the ‘truth’ about the animals. This relates to wildlife docu-soap being a hybrid genre, one aspect of which is that it combines narrativised stories highlighting drama and emotion, with reportage on the lives of wild animals. Those two aspects co-exist, to a different extent in MM and OI, and

¹³ A book called Meerkat Manor: Flower of the Kalahari. The book is on the lives of The Whiskers.

¹⁴ AP stands for Animal Planet.

¹⁵ Tim Clutton-Brock, Zoologist and one of the founders of the Kalahari Meerkat Project on which MM is based.

¹⁶ The page is actually not managed by Lone Nielsen herself. It is not clear who is in control of the page (It could be a fan or someone working close to Lone).

viewers turn to para- texts for assistance in distinguishing between them. Without these sources it is difficult to separate the narrativised animal lives from the ones that are perceived to be real, and the ones that are perceived to be real are those that are represented in scientific language on the research website or in the project book.

This use of credible para-texts is shown in the following comments.

“Flower DID in fact eat Mozart's pups. It was told on the actual KMP research website. Animal Planet probably didn't show it to protect their Flower from the same ranting as Kinkajou is not receiving” (YouTube)

“[Long quote from the official book] See? He moved them because of the ticks and fleas. Meerkats usually only stay at a burrow for 2 to 3 days, 3 weeks when they have pups, but they stayed at this one five weeks, and would stay longer if Yossarian hadn't done anything. He prevented deaths to most of the members from tick-and-flea-borne diseases” (TV.com)

In these quotes viewers judge the information from the research website and the official book to be more credible than the programme and use it to differentiate between what the animals actually do and what is created through the story-line. They also find out how events in the programme are constructed to present the characters in a good or bad light. The first quote refers to the omission of information about Flower, which they infer is to protect her reputation, while the second rehabilitates the reputation of one of the characters by finding an explanation of his behaviour. The effect of this is to show that the animals are not as good or as bad as they are made out to be in the narrative and reveals the way the moral character of the animals is constructed.

The differences in the realities constructed in the programmes and their para-texts are called out as lies by some audience members:

“Animal Planet is the worst at lies, especially when there are people who easily can find out the true facts” (YouTube)

“It’s not uncommon for plots on Meerkat Manor to be made up with lies just so it can seem more dramatic. One of worst examples of this has to be the whole Whiskers VS Zappa deal when in real life the two groups have never even met” (YouTube)

Audiences judge information on the research websites to be ‘fact’ while the programme’s website is ‘made up with lies’, a judgement which relates to the way the narratives construct events to create drama. This indicates that audiences are working with a hierarchy of knowledge which puts the research website above both the programmes and the Animal Planet web page linked to them. Furthermore, it is the scientific information on the research website that is regarded as authoritative and trustworthy. This highlights that the truth claims of scientific discourse are accepted and that scientific explanations of animal behaviour are seen as depicting reality while the reality in the programmes is understood as constructed.

My analysis demonstrates that audiences judge information according to a hierarchy of knowledge and that their judgements reflect an ability to critically evaluate different sources on this basis. When people encounter conflicting views, they assess them carefully to judge their trustworthiness (Britt et al., 1999; Kobayashi, 2014). These findings suggest that the availability of multiple sources, or para-texts, facilitate media literacy.

8.9: Conclusions

This chapter focused on online communities and their relation to audience responses. Mutual interest in the programmes is at the heart of audience interactions, with audience members sharing their feelings and enthusiasm about the programmes in online communities. Some of the communities, such as those on TV.com, are dedicated specifically to the programmes and more likely to attract fans. Because of this, many viewers experience online communities as a space where they can express their emotional responses to the animals and the programmes without feeling embarrassed or being ridiculed. On YouTube, particularly, there are criticisms of fans’ emotional responses but this does not detract from the experience of online communities as safe spaces. Fan-created videos on YouTube are another way that audience members show their dedication to the

programmes and the animals, and they act as a catalyst for interaction. These interactions lead to audiences' developing understandings of the programmes collectively. This refers to a process through which audience members influence each other's understanding rather than the emergence of a uniform response shared by all participants, but it also refers to shared assumptions that underpin their disagreements. My findings also show that not all interactions are friendly and that there is a variety of responses within online communities on the different platforms. Arguments occur on YouTube rather than on TV.com where interaction is friendly, and previous chapters have shown that the language used by posters on YouTube is excessive and performative. On IMDb there is no online community as interaction between posters is not facilitated. These findings highlight that platform differences are significant in relation to audience responses.

Audiences are critical of the programmes, focussing particularly on how the narratives construct the animal characters and their use of anthropomorphism. They voice criticisms of the way narratives construct the personalities and moral attributes of the animals when they regard the constructions as different from how the animals 'really' are. Furthermore, they are sometimes critical of the effects the narratives have on them as viewers. Although they are aware of such effects, audience members continue to watch the programmes and respond emotionally to them. My findings also highlight that audiences use various paratexts and help each other to critically evaluate the programmes and, particularly, to find out what has happened to the animals on whom the programmes are based. There is evidence that they perceive information on the research website as authoritative and trustworthy and the narrativised animal lives presented in the programmes as less reliable. In combination with some audiences' belief that the use of anthropomorphism in the programmes is 'fake', my findings suggest a greater respect for scientific discourse and a belief that the reality constructed by science is more valid than that constructed in the programmes.

This chapter is the last of my analysis chapters. The next chapter will summarize the main findings of my analysis and discuss how they respond to the questions that have guided my research.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This final chapter draws my thesis together. It presents a brief summary of my findings and then discusses how they respond to the research questions. My research questions focus on different aspects of audiences' responses: their emotional and sympathetic connections to the animal characters; how they engage with narratives; and the role of online communities and different platforms in constructing audience responses. I then discuss the contribution to knowledge made by this research.

9.1: Summary of findings

This thesis has explored the question of how audiences respond to wildlife docu-soaps by analysing responses to two wildlife documentaries, *Meerkat Manor* and *Orangutan Island*. In order to set these responses and the emergence of wildlife docu-soaps in context, I discussed how changes in human-animal relations and the effect of these changes on representations of animals in wildlife documentaries have been understood. I showed that images of animals in wildlife documentaries have become more empathetic in recent years (e.g. Chris, 2006) and that this corresponds to the argument that human-animal relations are becoming more empathetic in post-modern cultures (Franklin, 1999). I argued, however, that increasingly empathetic representations of animals in wildlife programmes are confined to some categories of animal and individuals in those categories rather than being generalizable to all animals. I understand wildlife docu-soaps as a sub-genre of wildlife documentary that shares particular features with other genres such as soap opera and reality TV. This sub-genre emerged not only as a result of cultural changes in attitudes towards animals but also as a result of changes in the television industry, including technological developments and the need to attract audiences. Wildlife docu-soaps have animals as the main characters, and their stories are dramatic and emotional, highlighting the individual biographies of the characters. These stories can be conceptualised as human-interest stories and I have used this concept to analyse audience responses to docu-soaps. I have shown that audiences' responses to wildlife docu-soaps vary, and are contradictory and suggest that this is because the programmes use animal characters to tell a story, but the events in the stories have an existence outside the programmes, particularly in the para-

texts accessed by some audience members. I also showed that, as well as the texts themselves, different platforms and online communities shape audience responses.

The audiences and responses that I focused on appear on three platforms: IMDb, TV.com and YouTube. My methodology was qualitative, consisting of content analysis which involves developing a set of codes in order to group audience responses. The codes captured the recurring themes and topics commented on by viewers. I also watched the programmes in order to familiarize myself with the storylines and analyse how the programmes are presented and narrated. A qualitative analysis is useful as it has allowed me to identify different elements in audience responses: responses to narratives, emotional responses, how responses are constructed by different online communities, and the role played by media literacy.

My findings show that the human-interest stories which structure the narrative of wildlife docu-soaps, together with the programmes' use of individualisation and anthropomorphism, allow audiences to see similarities between humans and other animals. Responses vary, though, and while there are comments that express emotional involvement with the animal characters, there are others that judge such involvement harshly. Moreover, some audience members regard the animal characters as quasi-humans and/or pets who, it has been argued, are also individualised (Thomas, 1983; Charles & Davies, 2008) while others comment that they are 'just animals'. Such responses suggest that for some audience members there is not a clear categorical boundary between humans and the animal characters in MM and OI while for others there is. I also explored whether the concepts para-social relations and identification can be used to understand audience responses. These concepts were developed to analyse responses to TV genres such as soap opera and reality TV (Sood, 2002; Briggs, 2010) and, as wildlife docu-soaps draw on similar conventions, they are useful for analysing audience responses. Despite this, however, there are aspects of audience responses that they are unable to account for; these are the responses which arise from the relation between the 'reality' which is constructed in wildlife docu-soaps and the realities constructed in para-texts where other information about the animals' lives is found. They are also unable to account for responses relating to the animal-ness of the programmes.

I also found that although audience responses relate to the narrative, they are contradictory and varied and that audience members are aware of and sometimes critical of the way the animals are constructed by the narrative. Thus, while some audience members hold Youssarian morally responsible for killing pups, another is critical of the way he is represented claiming it as ‘false publicity’. Contradictions are also found in audience responses to predators. Meerkats are themselves predators, they are often shown killing and eating scorpions, for instance. This notwithstanding, the meerkats themselves attract a range of emotional responses and are accepted as moral actors in many comments. Audience responses to animals who prey on meerkats, however, are closely connected to the representation of these species in the narration as enemies of meerkats and are viewed negatively. Audience discussions about human intervention also highlight different responses with some insisting that humans should save the animal characters, and others commenting that humans should not intervene with ‘nature’. Underlying these comments are assumptions about the relationship between humans and nature and whether humans are seen as part of nature or as separate from it.

My findings also show that the structural elements of the platforms, such as features which allow people to talk about the programmes, not only facilitate emotional responses and interaction between viewers but work as a learning environment where viewers develop collective understandings and are able to practise media literacy. My findings also highlight differences in audience responses in different platforms. In particular, audience responses on YouTube used more excessive language and have more disagreements than the other two platforms.

In the rest of this chapter, I will show how these findings address the research questions and the contribution my research makes to knowledge.

9.2: Research Questions

My research has been guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the responses of audiences to wildlife docu-soaps online?

- i) How do audiences respond to narrative structure and characterization?
 - ii) How do audiences connect emotionally with animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps?
- 2) How are audience responses shaped by online communities?
 - 3) How do different platforms affect the formation of online communities and through that, audience responses?

In what follows I discuss my findings as they relate to each research question separately.

9.3: What are the responses of online audiences to wildlife docu- soaps?

This first research question, ‘What are the responses of online audiences to wildlife docu-soaps?’ is divided into two parts which I look at in turn.

9.3.1: How do audiences respond to narrative structure and characterization?

In this section I discuss what my findings show about the way audiences engage online with the narrative structure of the programmes and the characterization of animals in MM and OI. I first discuss whether the concept of human-interest story is sufficient to understand audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. I show that while audiences respond emotionally to the narratives and become involved with the characters, there are tensions in their responses. It has long been recognised that there is variation in audiences’ reading of programmes (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980), and that this partly arises from individuals’ varied backgrounds and experiences (Briggs, 2010). Here I focus on the contradictions and tensions within audience responses that are specific and particular to wildlife docu-soaps.

In analysing audience responses to narrative and characterisation, I find that the concept of human-interest story is helpful in explaining audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps but

that the fact that the stories are based on the lives of real animals means that its usefulness is limited. Human-interest story is one of the key concepts I identified in my literature review. These stories focus on individual, emotional and dramatic events, and the literature suggests that they are effective for mobilising emotions (Mills, 2015; Cho & Gower, 2006; Scott, 2010). I have argued that the narratives of wildlife docu-soaps are human-interest stories, and, as a result, audience members engage emotionally in their responses. Some audience members focus on dramatic aspects of the story while others show empathetic responses when the animal characters face difficulties. Furthermore, audience members say that they see themselves in the animal characters, in other words they identify with them. Emotional involvement with the animal characters can also be understood in terms of the formation of para-social relations. Such responses are similar to those reported for other genres such as soap opera and reality TV - in the way that viewers relate to the characters (Sood, 2002), vicariously experience the characters' lives (Cohen, 2001) and relate to the characters' emotions and experiences (Briggs, 2010; Katz, Liebes & Berko, 1992). Thus the use of human-interest stories is related to audiences' emotional responses in a range of different genres including wildlife docu-soaps.

However, I would argue that human-interest story as a concept is not sufficient to explain audience responses because of the tension between the reality constructed by the narrative and the reality of the animals' lives. For instance, in human-based soap operas, when a character dies, the actor playing the character lives, while in wildlife docu-soaps, when an animal character dies, an animal actually dies (or at least we, as audiences, believe that they die). Audiences are aware of this and, in the case of the wildlife docu-soaps I studied, accessed para-texts to find out what happens to individual animals. This means that the human-interest story is not the only thing going on in wildlife docu-soaps and relates to the fact that wildlife docu-soaps not only share conventions with other TV genres, such as soap opera and reality TV, but also with wildlife documentaries. This is connected to the particular ways that audiences respond to wildlife docu-soaps: while they engage emotionally with the reality created through the narrativised human-interest story, they also understand that there is another reality where animals live and die, as is the case in all wildlife documentaries, but, in the case of wildlife docu-soaps, they may have formed para-social relations with animals who die and this renders their deaths more difficult to accept.

This point relates to audience discussions about human intervention. For instance, viewers argue about whether the film crews and the researchers on site should intervene in order to prevent individual animals from dying, especially when the animal is a character who they are particularly attached to such as Flower in MM. Such discussions are common, and two contrasting views are apparent: that human intervention is desirable to save animals from dying, and that humans should not interfere with nature. Discussions of the ethics of intervention are not peculiar to wildlife docu-soaps and arise with other genres such as reality TV, documentaries and news reports (Mast, 2016; Sanders, 2003b). In the case of MM and OI, however, audience responses engage with how the programme is made and the obvious human involvement in animal lives. For instance, audience members make points about the way programme makers profit financially from filming while the animals do not consent to be filmed. Also, some viewers comment that the film crews and researchers are already intervening in the animals' lives so there is no reason why they cannot help them. This latter point questions the separation between humans and nature which often characterises wildlife documentaries and recognises that human and animal lives are intertwined. The maintenance of non-intervention makes less sense in the context of wildlife docu-soap filming as human involvement in animal lives is made clear from the outset and the illusion of a pure nature, unsullied by human intervention, is questioned.

On the other hand, this is in tension with the conception of nature and the wild that excludes humans and is also present in the programmes. Some audience comments refer to this, perceiving the 'natural' world as one in which animals inevitably die and where human intervention would be an unwarranted intrusion. This is connected to how MM represents the Kalahari Desert as somewhere with no human presence and is highlighted by long shots of landscapes where there are no humans and no human-made objects. This conceptualization of nature and the wild comes from Western thought where dualistic terms are often found such as 'human and animal' and 'nature and culture' (Newton, 2007). This way of thinking separates humans from other animals. This highlights that there is a tension in audience responses between emotional involvement with the animal characters and the view that humans are separate from nature, the wild and animals.

These contradictory responses can also be thought of as arising from the entertainment and educational aspects of the programmes. While human-interest stories are shared with other genres, the dramatic and emotional stories and distinctive individual characters enable the

programmes to provide information about how the animals live as well as the research or conservation projects surrounding the programmes. These two are not mutually exclusive but, rather, co- exist. Audience members are aware of both aspects and enjoy the dramatic narratives while also appreciating the information they can gain from their viewing experience. This point connects to Bousé (1998, 2003) who argues that entertainment is a central aspect of wildlife documentaries. Likewise, Louson (2018) and Cowie (2011) argue that entertainment encourages audiences to learn about wildlife. My findings also suggest that the programmes' entertainment value attracts audiences' attention and emotionally involves them with the animals while also learning about wildlife. In addition, audience members exchange information in online communities and this further facilitates learning. The entertainment value of the programmes may also detract from audiences' willingness to learn by leading to emotional upset. For instance, some audience members comment that the deaths of the animals discourage them from continuing to watch the programmes as they find them too upsetting. In this way their emotional involvement is such that they would rather discontinue viewing than follow a story that they find distressing. This point highlights that certain aspects of the programmes may deter audiences from watching the programmes.

Moreover, audiences interpret the programmes in a range of ways. This is evident in audience responses surrounding the way gender is represented. In some audience comments the association of certain attributes with gender is accepted and in others it is found to be problematic. Thus the 'feminine' traits of characters such as Mozart in MM, who is represented as caring and loving, are usually accepted, I did not find any criticism of the association of stereotypically feminine traits with female characters. In contrast, Rocket Dog is not represented as typically feminine, she has characteristics associated with stereotypical ideas of masculinity and her name is also not typically feminine. In their responses, viewers frequently mistook Rocket Dog for a male; this is evident when they refer to her as 'he' or 'him'. So, although the programmes are in some ways fluid and flexible on representations of gender, some audience responses re-impose gender stereotypes. Furthermore, this mis-gendering of the animal characters has an effect on how audiences read those characters. For instance, Mozart's pregnancy and her role as a mother are frequently mentioned in audience comments while Rocket Dog's pregnancy is almost completely ignored. Such findings show how gender expectations influence the way audiences read characters and their stories.

Furthermore, some audience members are aware and critical of the effects the narratives have on their responses and go beyond the readings offered by the programmes. For instance, the narratives attribute moral values, which are often gendered, to the animal characters; they create 'good' and 'bad' characters as part of their creation of a dramatic and emotional story. In MM, the main characters, the members of the Whiskers, are often represented as 'good' while rival groups such as the Commandos are represented as 'bad'. While some audience members read the programme in this way, others are aware that this moral valuing is created and attributed through the narratives and understand how the narratives influence their responses. Some audience members also do not agree with the moral judgements implicit in the narrative. For instance, when a character directly or indirectly kills another character and is represented as a 'bad' character, some viewers defend them, arguing that they are wild animals and they kill others in order to survive. For some audience members there are, therefore, no good or bad animals despite their representation as such in the narrative. In contrast, predators are almost always represented in a negative light, and audience responses reproduce such valuations. As I argue below, this relates to the lack of individualisation of predators in comparison to the meerkats and orangutans who are the central characters in the programmes. This ability to contest the way narratives construct characters and the awareness of how narratives manipulate their own responses shows that some audience members are reflexive in the way they respond to the narratives.

Audience responses also show an awareness of genre. There is evidence that audiences recognise wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre that shares similarities with other genres and that this recognition shapes their responses. On the one hand they respond to the educational and informative elements of the programmes - qualities associated with documentaries - and, on the other hand, their responses reflect the emotional and dramatic story lines associated with the human-interest stories typical of soap opera.

At this point, it should be noted that there are differences in audience responses between MM and OI. It has been pointed out that MM and OI are different in terms of structure and narrative although they are both wildlife docu-soaps. MM's narrative has a similar structure to soap opera including: strong characters, many of whom are female; character development throughout the series; and dramatic and emotional stories focussing on individuals' dramatic life events. OI, in contrast, shares more with reality TV: artificial set-

ups, the story is not character driven, and there is more focus on dramatic encounters among the characters. Such differences seem to be associated with different audience responses. MM audiences show stronger emotional connections with the animal characters, understood in terms of identification and para-social relations, and they more frequently refer to dramatic events in the narratives such as deaths and romantic relationships. This is partly because deaths happen more frequently in MM than in OI, but it also seems to be due to the dramatization of such events and the audiences' resulting emotional involvement with the animal characters. While audience responses to OI also show emotional involvement, it is not as strongly expressed as that shown by audiences of MM. This shows that different narratives structures may be connected to different audience responses.

In summary, audiences show a variety of responses to wildlife docu-soaps, some of which reproduce the meanings offered in the programmes and some of which create their own meanings. Some are particular to the programmes, such as questions about the ethics of human intervention that are rooted in how the programme is made. In addition, audience responses differ between MM and OI which may, of course, relate to the differences between meerkats and orangutans. This suggests that the different narrative structure and characterisation of the two programmes are associated with audience responses but that audiences read the texts in different ways. I return to these differences later in the chapter when I discuss the relation between audience responses and the different platforms. Such findings highlight audiences' active engagement with the narratives which give rise to sometimes contradictory responses.

9.3.2: How do audiences connect emotionally with animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps?

In this section I discuss how individualisation and anthropomorphism are important to audiences' emotional responses to animal characters. I argue that individualised and anthropomorphised representations of animals contribute to breaking down the alleged boundary between humans and other animals in audiences' responses. Finally, this section considers whether concepts like para-social relations and identification are sufficient to understand audience responses.

In previous chapters, I have argued that the individualisation of the animal characters in wildlife docu-soaps is key to audiences' emotional responses for both MM and OI. I find that audiences express a range of emotional responses towards the animal characters which are both positive and negative: audiences express positive emotions such as love, like and sympathy as well as negative emotions such as hatred and dislike. The key to viewers' emotional responses is the individualisation of the animal characters through which they can see the personality traits, back-story and distinctiveness of each animal. One of the ways wildlife docu-soaps individualise animal characters is through naming and I found that in audience responses great importance is attached to individual names: viewers not only recognize each character's name but also use them, and there are harsh criticisms when someone misspells a character's name online. The importance of individualisation in relation to audiences' emotional responses are also reflected in comments on predators. The meerkat predators in MM are not individualised: they are not named and are referred to as a typical example of the species rather than an individual. As a result, audiences show no attachment to these predators. Other researchers have also found naming to be important in relation to emotional attachment. Thus the naming of lab animals is discouraged because it promotes emotional attachment to the animals on the part of those using them for research (Philips, 1994) while Milton (2002) notes that wildlife docu-soaps enable people to appreciate that animals have feelings by looking at the intimate lives of individual animals. Indeed, my findings indicate that audience members appreciate that animal have emotional lives because of the way they are depicted in the programmes although not all audience members agree with this.

The importance of individualisation to audiences' ability to form emotional attachments to animal characters is also revealed by the changing representations of animals in wildlife programmes. For instance, Franklin (1999) points out that changing sensibilities about animals since the 1970s was reflected in an increase in animal-related TV content. Furthermore, the content of the programmes also became more focused on the intimate lives of animals rather than anthropocentric content that focuses on the killing of animals or the human presenter. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, wildlife docu-soap as a genre emerged as a result of increasing commercial pressures within the TV industry, technological change, and changing ideas about animals. The use of anthropomorphism and more empathetic ways of representing animals became popular after Disney's *True-Life Adventure* series between 1948 and 1960 (Bousé, 2000). Subsequently animal programmes increasingly focused on the intimate lives of animals using the fly-on-the wall

techniques (Franklin, 1999) enabled by the development of technology. Wildlife docu-soaps focus on animals as central characters with their intimate life dramas, and the animals are individualised so that audiences can identify with them. Indeed, my findings show that such representations of animal characters are associated with empathetic and emotional responses on the part of audiences.

In fact, it is not only individualisation but also anthropomorphism that is important to audiences' emotional responses. In Chapter 3 I discussed the definition of anthropomorphism proposed by Crist (2000) which is the one I use here. It focuses on the way language constructs animals either by emphasising differences between humans and animals or emphasising animals' subjectivity and their lives as meaningful. I do not argue that one use of language is better than another but aim to highlight the different uses of language and their implications for how animals are understood. Wildlife docu-soaps anthropomorphise the animal characters; for instance, animals are often described in 'ordinary' (Crist, 2000) language that highlights the similarities between humans and other animals, such as 'housekeeping' for cleaning up a burrow or 'showing a new routine to show off to friends' when an orangutan plays with a stick. It is not only behaviours, but certain inner states, such as motivations, and animals' social organisation which are referred to in language that highlights the way animal behaviour mirrors that of humans (Crist, 2000). Such representations not only encourage audiences to be aware of closeness between humans and other animals but also to create a story which audience members can see themselves in. Previous research has found that the perception that animals have emotions increases people's moral concern for them (Clayton, & Burgess, 2011), and attributions of cognitive ability encourage people to empathize with non-human animals (Hills, 1995). Correspondingly, my findings indicate that audience members become aware of similarities between humans and animals because of their anthropomorphic representation and the language used in the narration.

In this thesis I have replicated the 'ordinary' language used in the programmes. This is precisely because the use of such language highlight similarities between humans and other animals while more technical or scientific language emphasises differences. Ordinary language reflects my understanding that humans and animals share many aspects of their lives such as emotions, and breaks down the boundary between humans and other animals that is set up by more 'objective' languages.

Moreover, audiences' perceptions of similarities between humans and other animals seem to be connected to this blurring of the boundary that has been constructed in Western thought between humans and animals. My findings highlight that audience members sometimes perceive the animal characters to be pets or quasi-human, and that these categorizations are closely related to their emotional responses. Such a finding corresponds to Bulliet's (2006) argument that empathetic attitudes are targeted towards certain categories of animals such as pets. He also points out people's emotional distance from farm animals which recalls the more emotionally distant responses to animals who are not individualised but referred to in terms of group membership. This blurred categorization of wild animals and pets may relate to audiences' perceptions of animals as similar to humans. Indeed, pet animals are increasingly perceived as family members (Franklin, 1999), which has been linked to their ambivalent status (Fox, 2006) although it may also relate to definitions of families as multi-species (Power, 2008; Charles, 2016). Either way, this shows that there is less of a barrier between humans and some categories of animals in audience responses although there is a tension, with some viewers reinstating a fundamental difference between humans and animals. The use of the pronoun 'who' to refer to individual animals is also connected to closeness between animals and humans and sees them in an equal light (Gilquin & Jacobs, 2006). Although, many audience members are aware of the use of anthropomorphism in the programmes, the way it is used seems to encourage them to see similarities between themselves and other animals.

One of my concerns is whether the emotional responses of audiences can be understood through the concepts identified in my literature review: para-social relations and identification. These concepts have been commonly applied to other TV genres (e.g. Baym, 2000; Sood, 2002). In Chapter 7, I argued that viewers form para-social relations and identify with the animal characters: they refer to the animal characters as if they are someone they are familiar with and see themselves in those characters. These responses can be understood through concepts which have been developed for other TV genres, and this indicates that, in certain respects, responses to wildlife docu-soaps are similar to other genres. There are, however, differences between MM and OI with the concepts being more helpful for understanding audience responses to the former than the latter; as I have already suggested, this may be related to the programmes' different narrative structures and characterisation. It is significant that these concepts can be applied to audience responses

to wildlife docu-soaps considering the characters of the wildlife docu-soaps are animals rather than humans. But as I argued above in relation to human-interest stories, while the concepts are relevant for understanding audiences' emotional responses to animal characters, there are aspects of audience responses that they do not address.

Audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps are different from responses to other genres and these differences relate to the animal-ness of the characters. For instance, some comments contain phrases about individual characters such as, they are 'just an animal', thereby dismissing those who respond to the animal characters emotionally. Alongside comments that express emotional and empathetic responses to the representations of animals and accept the similarities between humans and animals, these 'just an animal' comments signify a hierarchical and anthropocentric relationship between humans and other animals, one which should not involve emotions. These responses, however, which emphasise the animal-ness of the animal characters, are embedded in debates about animals' subjectivity and their similarities to humans and, related to this, the relative status of humans and animals. Furthermore, audience responses question the relationship between humans, wild animals and nature as is shown in discussions about human intervention. These differences in response highlight that the concepts para-social relations and identification only go so far in explaining audience responses; other responses arise from the hybridity of the programmes and the fact that their representations of animal lives raise significant questions for audiences which they discuss with each other in online communities.

In summary, both anthropomorphism and individualisation are key to audiences' emotional responses, and together they have the effect of emphasising similarities between humans and animals. Audience responses can be analysed in terms of para-social relations and identification but these concepts do not capture the responses that relate to the animal-ness of the animal characters and the fact that their lives are real as well as part of a human-interest story. Audience responses are contradictory, with some expressing emotional connections to the animal characters and others being critical of such expression on the basis that the characters are animals. This highlights the particularities of responses to wildlife docu-soaps in comparison to other human-based programmes such as docu-soaps and soap opera and the limitations of these concepts.

9.4: How are audience responses shaped by online communities?

This section focuses on the question of how online communities shape audience responses. My findings show that online communities: provide a space for viewers to find others who are also interested in wildlife docu-soaps; enable viewers to share their thoughts and express their emotions; create a space for the emergence of fan communities; allow audiences to develop a collective understanding of the programmes as well as share information about them; and enable audiences to practise media literacy.

One of the ways online communities shape audience responses is by providing a space for those who share similar interests (Ridings & Gefen, 2004); furthermore the online environment makes it easier for viewers to find others who are similar to them (McKenna et al., 2002; Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Yan et al., 2016). My findings show that this is the case for wildlife docu-soap audiences. Online spaces become particularly significant when viewers are uncomfortable expressing their emotions off-line and this relates to the fact that they are expressing emotional connections to animals. Indeed, my findings indicate that some viewers are ridiculed or feel embarrassed about expressing emotional responses off-line, and for them, these online platforms are a ‘safe space’ to share their thoughts and express their emotional responses to the programmes and the animal characters. The online communities I have studied foster a sense of belonging marked by shared connections to and interest in the animals who are the central characters in the programmes.

The affinity audience members experience, through their shared interest in MM or OI, is connected to the concept of fans and fan communities. Although there are debates about what a ‘fan’ is (see Chapter 3), Jenkins (2006) argues that affinity is central to fan communities, and the online communities I studied have a shared interest in wildlife docu-soaps. Audience members go online and interact with others who are interested in the same programmes, and it is this affinity and engagement in activities, such as cosplay, writing fan novels and participating in a community, that defines them as fans (Jenkins, 2006; Gwenllian-Jones, 2002; Brojakowski, 2015). Examples of interaction between fans is provided by the fan-created content on YouTube which attracts comments from other viewers and the affirmation of emotional connections between audience members and animal characters.

Expressions of emotion are not always met with support, though, and some comments are critical of any emotional attachment to animals. There is also evidence of both friendship and interest driven participation in online activities (Jenkins, Ito and Boyd, 2017). The videos fans produce create a sense of belonging and enable friendships to develop and at the same time provide a space where audience members can practise various online tools and skills such as video editing skills.

Another way online communities shape audience responses is through developing a collective understanding of the programmes. I use the idea of collective understanding to refer to the way audiences exchange information and opinions about the programmes and the animal characters and how these exchanges shape their responses. In Jenkins' (2006) research, collective understanding refers to the way audiences share clues, information, theories and thoughts to solve a problem, as in *Twin Peaks* fan communities. However, this works for mystery genres where audiences work together to solve a puzzle, but does not capture the variety in audience responses that I have identified in my research. Indeed, the sense of collective understanding relevant to my study points to a process whereby audience members develop responses to the programme through interaction with others while retaining individual variation in responses. Community aspects, such as talking about a programme with friends and colleagues, are a significant part of viewing all genres including soap opera (Brown, 1994; Baym, 2000) and reality TV (Hill, 2005), and wildlife docu-soaps audiences also share their thoughts and emotions. They have a range of discussions relating to the programmes, and these shape their responses towards not only the programmes but also issues related to the programmes such as the ethics of human intervention mentioned earlier.

Related to the development of collective understandings of the programmes, online communities become a learning space for audiences to gain information. My findings suggest that audiences frequently exchange information, and this information is not only linked to the programmes and the animal characters but also to wildlife more generally. For instance, viewers ask questions about why the animals live in a particular habitat or whether the death of a pup (in MM) affects the survival of the group. These questions are often answered by other viewers, and this gives audiences a chance to learn more about the animals concerned. In contrast, there are not many questions asked about the conservation project which OI is based on. There are two aspects to be considered in relation to this.

First, OI contains a lot of information about the rehabilitation centre. Indeed, one of the episodes focuses on how Lone, the project founder, spends her day in the facility. Second, there are few para-texts about the rehabilitation facility compared to MM. These aspects may contribute to OI audiences not exchanging much information about the project

Indeed, audience responses to MM also include an exchange of information about the research with which it is associated. Viewers ask questions about the aims of the research and how it is done, such as wanting to know how the meerkats are tracked and how the tracking collars are attached to them. Relevant information about the animals and the research is found on the research website which constitutes an important para-text for MM and is significant for audiences' understandings of, not only the programme and how it was made, but also how the animals live. Audiences of MM engage with the explicit association between the programme and the research project and display critical views of the relation between the narrativised lives and the representations of the animals' lives on the research website. Accessing much of its content, however, requires paid membership. Information about the research is communicated within the online communities. In the programmes themselves, the narration does not explain much about the research. Instead its focus, as I have shown, is on the animal characters and the dramas they are involved with. This means that interactions in online communities provide viewers with information about the research and enable them to learn about the animals in a range of ways.

These exchanges of information also help audiences to navigate through wildlife docu-soaps as a hybrid genre. My findings indicate that audiences in the online communities try to disentangle what is narrativised from what they see as real and that this relates to the reality constructed on the research project website. Viewers gather information from para-texts, such as the research website for MM which publishes information about which actual animals die, and which viewers regard as having greater authority than the narrativised events. This helps audience members find out whether the death of an animal character did indeed take place and is shared in the online communities; in this way viewers help each other to disentangle these elements. This raises an important point about a hierarchy of knowledge. My findings show that some audience members perceive the information on the research website as 'truth' and the stories in the programmes as 'lies'. In other words the research website is judged to be more authoritative and trust-worthy than the programmes. This may be connected to the research website being perceived as more

‘scientific’ than the programmes, and the reality constructed through scientific discourse being seen as more valid than that constructed through anthropomorphised and individualised animals’ stories.

Moreover, online communities are also a space where audiences’ media literacy is enacted. Media literacy is one of the key concepts identified in the literature review, and my findings indicate that audiences not only demonstrate media literacy but also encourage each other to be critical of information and the information sources available on the internet. I have found that audiences use various para-texts to collect information on the programmes, and often critically judge these texts based on their perceived authority and trust-worthiness. For instance, some audience members comment that information on Wikipedia is not trustworthy as the website can be edited by anyone but tend to regard information on the research website as authoritative, perhaps because it is written by experts. These activities in online communities - learning and practising media literacy - shape audiences’ responses as the information they gather and discuss is likely to influence their understanding of and responses to the programmes, the narratives and the animal characters. In this sense a collective response is created. It should be noted that most of the activities related to media literacy are found in MM audience responses. This is because there are various websites and information sources related to MM including: Fandom webpages dedicated to MM characters, a book written by one of the researchers, and a research website providing information about the research and the animal featured in MM. These linked para-texts can be seen as constructing different realities as well as providing information about the animals and the programmes; they give audiences an opportunity to gather information and critically compare information sources. It is also significant that audiences use these para-texts to gather information on the animals both as individuals and as species; this type of information gathering is, I suggest, linked to the animal-ness of the programmes.

This section has shown that online communities shape audience responses by allowing audience members to find others who share their interest in the programmes, and enabling them to interact with each other, sharing their thoughts and exchanging information. These activities give rise to a collective response in the sense that audiences influence each other’s responses to the programmes through interactions in the online communities; they develop their individual responses in dialogue with others. Also, audience members teach

each other how to be critical of the sources of information they find online. This not only influences their understandings of the programmes but also their general skills of media literacy.

9.5: Do different platforms affect the formation of online communities and through that, audience responses?

While online communities shape audience responses in various ways, I also found that different platforms are connected to different forms of online communities. The three platforms that I researched, IMDb, TV.com and YouTube, have different structures (Chapter 4) and are associated with different types of responses. These differences include the degree of interaction, the formation of communities, collective understandings of the programmes and disagreements. This section focuses on these differences.

The interactive functions of a platform such as forums and comment sections are strongly connected to the formation of an online community. They allow audiences to not only exchange thoughts and information about wildlife docu-soaps but also to get to know each other. This was evident in some of the audience responses shown in earlier chapters. Thus, in Chapter 8, viewers were looking for other fans to share their excitement about the programmes, expressing emotional responses together and calling each other ‘friends’. These interactions were only observed in TV.com and YouTube. As Baym (2010) argues, an online community’s key qualities are connected to users’ interactions which involve shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relationships. I have found that the online communities associated with wildlife docu-soaps are characterised by shared identities, in so far as they all identify as fans of the programmes, and that this identity is often enacted through disagreement as well as agreement. Some audience members, for instance, ridicule those who express emotional responses to the animals and this was particularly obvious on YouTube. This suggests that online communities are a space shared by audience members and that they have a range of perceptions and opinions; furthermore some comments may not be experienced as supportive. Despite these differences, interactions within the online communities engendered a sense of community and belonging for viewers. Furthermore, I found that the functions of each website significantly influence whether viewers are able to interact, exchange information, develop collective understandings of the programmes and create a community.

I also found that certain platforms exhibited more polarized opinions. On YouTube there were disagreements amongst audience members over issues such as human intervention and, as I discussed earlier, arguments between those who express emotional connections with the animal characters and those who are critical of such connections. Meanwhile, more friendly interactions were observed on TV.com. Here viewers ask each other where they are from and discuss issues engagingly and affably, and although they sometimes disagree with each other, they tend not to swear or become aggressive. This is in direct contrast to YouTube where discussions and disagreements tend to become heated, and comments often include swear words or other hostile language. This may partly arise because people can stumble upon videos on YouTube, so those who post are not necessarily as engaged with the programmes as those who post on TV.com or IMDb. The communities on YouTube are also much larger and, as Jenkins (2006) observes, a large community is unlikely to be characterised by a homogeneity of beliefs or practices. Finally, the conventions of YouTube differ from the other platforms and more expressive and extreme language is much more likely.

Such disagreements highlight that audiences' responses are not uniform and relate to the platform. The argumentative interactions on YouTube highlight the variability of audiences' attitudes and responses. Disagreements also relate to collective understandings of the programmes: collective understandings are connected to audiences' collaborative actions such as sharing thoughts and information, so aggressive disagreements mean that audience members are not cooperating with each other. This may seem to contradict the previous finding that audiences develop their responses to the programmes collectively; however, these disagreements can also be seen as a part of the process of developing responses collectively. In this way, disagreements are part of an exchange and contribute to understandings that have been developed as part of a collective process.

This section has focused on the connection between different platforms, online communities and audience responses. My findings indicate that a platform's functions and, particularly, whether they allow audience interaction, are significant in relation to the creation of an online community and, through that, audiences' responses. Of course, interactions may involve disagreements and hostile arguments, but this does not

necessarily contradict the idea that audience responses develop collectively, through interaction with each other.

9.6: Contribution to knowledge

Audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps is an under-researched area, and my findings contribute to understanding the nature of these responses. I have shown that there are similarities between audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps and to other TV genres but there are also crucial differences which relate to the fact that wildlife docu-soaps are a hybrid genre and are about animals.

As with soap opera audiences, wildlife docu-soap audiences relate to the characters (Sood, 2002), vicariously experiencing events (Cohen, 2001) and the characters' emotions (Briggs, 2010; Katz, Liebes & Berko, 1992). Most of the literature on audience responses relates to human-based programmes and use the concepts para-social relations, human-interest story and identification to analyse audience responses. I have argued that audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps can be partly understood through these concepts but that they cannot account for the full range of responses.

The limitations arise because of the animal-ness of wildlife docu-soaps; they focus on live animals and the events portrayed, such as an individual character's death, are 'real'. This affects audience responses in so far as it gives rise to discussions of the ethics of human intervention in the animals' lives and to comments that the characters are 'only' animals therefore emotional attachment to them is inappropriate. There is also a level of reflexivity amongst audiences about the way that their emotions are engaged through the stories and an awareness of how the programmes are made. This indicates that audience responses are deeply rooted in the fact that the characters are real animals and relates to wildlife docu-soap as a hybrid genre; concepts which have been developed for analysing audience responses to other genres, such as para-social relations and identification, while useful, do not capture all the dimensions of audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps. This suggests the need to develop concepts that specifically focus on animal-based programmes such as wildlife docu-soaps.

My findings highlight that audiences of wildlife docu-soaps actively and critically engage with the narratives. For wildlife documentary, Bousé (2003) expresses concern that representations of animals may affect people's attitudes towards animals, and research shows that audiences are likely to take wildlife documentaries as trust-worthy and accurate (ITC/BSC, 2003). I have found that although audiences emotionally engage with the narratives, they are also highly critical of them. This contributes to discussions of audiences' critical viewing of programmes (Gray, 2017 on news story; Geraghty, 1991 on soap opera; Hill, 2005 on reality TV) and shows the form it takes with audiences of wildlife docu-soaps. In particular audiences are critical of how animals are represented in the programmes and show an awareness of the impact of individualising and naming animals on their own emotional responses. Moreover, this critical engagement is facilitated by online communities. Audiences check and exchange information from other para-texts to distinguish between what is constructed by the stories and what happens to the actual animals. This leads to criticism of the narrativised lives of the animals which is compared to the reality constructed in para-texts. Audiences also demonstrate an awareness of how the programmes are made and raise questions about human intervention in animal lives and the ethics of profiting from filming wild animals. These findings show that aspects of audiences' responses are specific to the programmes being about animals and based on the lives of animals who have an existence outside the programmes.

There is an ongoing debate about the educational value of wildlife programmes and whether entertainment and spectacle detract from this. Some suggest that spectacle detracts from the educational aspects of wildlife documentary (Griffiths, 2008; Dingwall & Aldridge, 2006; Gouyon, 2016), while others argue that entertainment is a central aspect of wildlife documentaries, and that their educational aspects can be entertaining and entertainment can be educational (Bousé, 1998, 2003; Cowie, 2011). Still others argue that spectacle in wildlife programming facilitates a process of 'affective learning' (Louson, 2018) rather than being separate from it. My findings support this last position, indicating that audiences enjoy the entertaining aspects of wildlife docu-soaps and that the narrativised lives of the animals enable audience members to identify with them and appreciate their similarities to humans. In addition, audience members' emotional engagement with the animal characters stimulates them to ask questions about the issues raised in the programmes and in this way they learn from each other about the animals' lives. This supports the argument that spectacle and entertainment in programmes about wild animals facilitate rather than detracting from learning.

Although I have suggested that audiences develop a collective response to wildlife docu-soaps, the nature of this response differs from that found in audience responses to other genres. As I pointed out above, the term collective understanding was used by Jenkins (2006) referring to fans of *Twin Peaks*. Baym (2010) also argues that audiences develop a collective understanding of complex narratives online as well as making a collective effort to retain information about programmes (Baym, 2010). I have found that audiences in online communities discuss the programmes and exchange information, and that such interactions influence how they understand the programmes. This does not mean, however, that their responses are uniform; in fact they vary considerably and are marked by tensions and contradictions. Thus I have found that there is a collective process through which audiences share views and information about the programmes and help each other complete the stories by filling in the gaps. In this way, they influence each other's understandings of the programmes thereby producing a response which is collective rather than individual. While there may be a uniform collective response for Jenkins's (2006) mystery genres, such as who is the murderer, wildlife docu-soaps do not have definite conclusions or readings and hence the process of developing an understanding collectively leads to variety of responses.

Collective understandings are partly achieved through online learning and the development of media literacy which I found amongst audiences utilizing online spaces. Within online communities audiences exchange information about the programmes, and indeed, they learn about various subjects such as wildlife and scientific research through interacting with others. Thus learning takes place in the online communities I have analysed. Moreover, audiences are not only critical, carefully judging information and information sources, but they encourage each other to develop these skills, albeit within a hierarchy of knowledge. This relates to Falero's (2016) analysis of online communities which finds that audiences in online communities encourage each other to be critical of programmes. My findings, however, suggest that audiences' critical judgements of online sources are based on the assumption that 'scientific' sources are the most authoritative and 'truthful' about animal lives and the narrativised accounts presented in the programmes are deemed less 'real'. Yoon (2009) argues that scientific taxonomy separates humans and animals but audience responses demonstrate emotional connections between viewers and the animal characters. This suggests a tension between accepting scientific accounts as more

authoritative while also showing emotional responses to what are seen as less authoritative narrativised accounts in the programmes. Future research could investigate this tension between scientific discourse and audiences' emotional responses.

There are ongoing debates about the ethics of filming animals and my findings show that audiences discuss and are concerned about the ethics of filming animals for wildlife docu-soaps. Richards (2014) raises a question about the ethical responsibilities that wildlife documentary film makers owe to animals which is also raised in audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps, particularly MM. Some comments point out that film crews 'owe' animals because they make a profit by filming animals, and some argue that humans on the filming site should intervene to prevent individual animals from dying; there is disagreement about this latter point with some arguing for intervention while others argue against it. What is highlighted by these differences is that audience responses to wildlife docu-soaps include discussions about ethical questions which are not raised explicitly in the programmes themselves and that audiences are aware of how the programmes are made. Previous research on filming wild animals focuses on the ethical questions raised for producers and film makers (Richards, 2014; Mills, 2010). My findings show that audiences are also concerned about the ethics of filming wild animals but, in addition, their ethical concerns raise questions about the nature of the relationship between humans and animals in an environment where human intervention is unavoidable.

These findings suggest that audiences' responses are shaped by various factors: audiences' critical and reflexive engagement with narratives, particular representations of animals, interacting with others in online communities and posting reviews online. Audiences guide each other through representations and narratives which are complex due to wildlife docu-soaps' nature as a hybrid genre. Many audience members are aware of the way fact and narrativised stories are woven together in the programmes and co-operate with each other to disentangle them; they exchange information and information sources to discover what happens to the real animals on which the narrativised stories are based. This shows that online communities have an important role in providing a space for audiences to respond to the animal-ness of the programmes. Audience members not only engage with the animals as real animals and as TV characters in the narrativised stories, but they also discuss various aspects which relate to the animal-ness of the programmes, such as animals' subjectivities and feelings, humans' relationships with nature/wild animals through

discussions of human interventions, and how certain representations of animals may impact on their responses.

Finally, I have argued that anthropomorphic representations and the individualisation of animal characters encourage audience members to emotionally engage with the animals; the importance of anthropomorphism and individualisation for emotional attachment is widely documented (Philips, 1994; Sanders, 2003a; Stibbe, 2001; Morton, 2002) but has not previously been analysed amongst audiences of wildlife docu-soaps. I argue that audience members respond to the animal characters empathetically, and although they are aware that the animal characters are created through the story, their emotional responses to them enable them to see similarities between humans and other animals. The narratives also attribute moral values to the animals. As I have suggested, this attribution can have negative impacts, as in the case of sharks, and is often gendered, but it also encourages audiences to include animals in the moral community and make favourable comparisons with some human behaviour. This suggests that certain representations of animals may encourage people to challenge the categorical boundary between humans and other animals, adopt more inclusive attitudes and accept that (some) animals have moral worth. Television programmes like MM and OI which highlight similarities between humans and other animals and show the intimate emotional lives of animals are a catalyst for such widespread empathy as this analysis of audience responses to them shows. Although some may perceive representations which rely on tools such as anthropomorphism problematic, I argue that anthropomorphism enables us to see the similarities between humans and animals and that seeing animals ‘just like us’ is a step towards a future where there is no hierarchy constructed between humans and other animals. Moreover, audiences’ responses to these programmes include various discussions surrounding relations between humans and animals including how animals should be treated. Hence, this thesis concludes with a hope for even more widespread empathy towards, moral inclusiveness of, and humane treatment of animals in the future.

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Appendix A

The first coding list

Category	Code name	Definition	Example
Aspects of the story	Death	Death of a character(s)	Flower died in this episode
	Birth (giving birth)	Birth of pups/giving birth	There were so many pups born this time
	Child caring	about taking care of pups, growth of pups	Flower doesn't take care of pups/the pups are all grown up
	Conflict within the species	Same species conflict (e.g. fight for a mating partner)	Flower kicked out her daughter out from the group
	Conflict with other species	conflict with predators or any other species different from main species	The scene about the fox is trying to eat the pups was scary
	Romance	Romantic aspects of the story (e.g. falling in love)	I think those two are in love
	Friendship	Friendship among characters	Those two are really good friends
Aspects of the Programmes	Specific Character	Mention of an individual character/name	Flower, Zaphod etc.
	Specific Species	Mention of a specific species (e.g. Meerkat)	Meerkat. Orangutans etc.
	Story-line	Comments on story-line	The story line wasn't good in Season 3

	Technical Aspects	Comments on technical aspects (e.g. lightning, camera angle)	The camera angle was really bad in this scene
Conservation	General suggestion	General suggestion for conservation activity	We should protect wildlife
	Call for individual actions	Suggestion to take individual actions	There are charities to save wildlife, everyone should donate money
	Call for social/political change	Suggestions to make changes socially or politically	The government should take an action to save the animals
Emotions	Positive	Signs of good emotions	I like meerkats
	Negative	Signs of bad emotions	I hate this programme
	Detachment	Comment related to detachment to wildlife	I rarely see wildlife in my daily life
	Empathy	Comment related to empathy towards wildlife	It made me cry when Flower died
	Honour	Comment honouring wildlife/characters	I respect Flower, the queen!
Attitudes	Anthropomorphic language (positive)	Anthropomorphic language/expressions used by the online audience	Flower is a really good mother, she loves her children!
	Anthropocentric language (negative)	Anthropocentric language/expressions used by the online audience	Why care about animals when there are more important problems in our society

Values	Traditional gender role	Mention of traditional gender role(s)	Female should stay at home and taking care of pups
	Traditional family values	Mention of traditional family values	Father and mother should be present in a family
	Morality	Mention of morality	That is morally wrong
	Good quality	Comment about good quality/characteristics	The character is very royal, that is why I like him
	Bad quality	comment about bad quality/characteristics	He betrayed her. That's very mean and nasty.

Appendix B

The second coding list

Category	Code name	Definition	Example
Anthropomorphism	Individualisation/naming	Comments which highlight non-human animal character's individuality including individual names	look at FLOWERS eyes & see the emotions in her
	Humanization	Comments which represent non-human characters with human-like qualities	HEY MEERKATS HAVE LIVES AND EMOTIONS TOO!!!
	De-humanization	Comments which highlight the animality/non-humanness of non-human characters	it's just a fucking rat
Narrative and plot aspects	Death	Comments which mention the death of non-human characters	I cant believe she died
	Birth	Comments which mention	Flower gave birth to heroes

		the birth/reproduction of non-human characters	
	Romance	Comments which mention romantic relationship among non-human characters	Flower and Zaphod are together forever!
Fan community	Support	Comments which support the actions/opinions of other fans	awesome video 5 stars I loved it oh and a fav=D
	Questioning	Comments which ask questions to other fans/seeking information from other fans	What program did you use?
	Socializing	Online fan socializing	you guys kept me going!
Moral Judgement	Positive	Positive judgement towards non-human characters, their actions/qualities	Flower and I do shed tears for this brave little Meerkat who cared so much for her family.
	Negative	Negative judgement	i hate any snake including

		towards non-human characters, their actions/qualities	cobras. they r deathly killers
Casual education	Information seeking	Comments which question the science behind the shows	How do they distinguish which meerkat is which?
	Information providing	Comments which explain the science behind the shows	The meerkats have dark spots on their backs, shoulders, tail-bases, etc. to distinguish them.
Media literacy	Critical	Critical analysis and evaluation of the programmes including plot lines	sure there is some tricky editing to make the story work
	Uncritical	Acceptance of face values of the programmes	it is the hard facts of life in the Kalahari and it is an amazing show.
Emotional connections	Sympathy	Sympathy expressed towards non-human characters	I was always in her corner every time she pulled her clan out of bad situations.

	Respect	Respect expressed towards non-human characters	she was amazing, a great leader, partner and parent.
	Sorrow/sadness	Sorrow and sadness expressed towards non-human characters	I can't stop crying!!!!!!
	Love/like	Love and like expressed towards non-human characters	I think that I love him so much
	Hate/dislike	Hate and dislike expressed towards non-human characters	I hate Wilson for leaving her
	Anger	Anger expressed towards non-human characters	to shoot a fucking snake cuz it killed the manor's flower!
Human influence	Nature	Opinions that nature should not be interfered with by humans	but nature makes things happen like that.. no one can do anything
	Human intervention	Opinions that human	They [researchers]

		intervention is necessary	should also save their lives.
Human-animal boundary	Similarity	Comments which highlight similarity between humans and non-human animals	wow, they're so much like people
	Difference	Comments which highlight difference between humans and non-human animals	Animals have no "feelings"
Science vs Entertainment	Science	Opinions that the programmes are more science/education orientated	Meerkat Manor is a very educational show
	Entertainment	Opinions that the programmes are more entertainment orientated	This show is like a little soap but with meerkats as the lead characters.
To the programmes	Love/like	Positive emotions expressed towards the programmes	I love this show!!!
	Hate/dislike	Negative emotions expressed	ARRRGHGH!! !! this show is so stupid I SWEAR!

		towards the programmes	
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Appendix C

The third coding list

Category	Code name	Definition	Example
Human-animal relationship	Individualisation/names	Individual name of non-human characters	Flower, Saturnus etc.
	Similarity between humans and animals	Comments which highlight similarity between humans and non-human animals including ascribing human qualities to non-human characters	they're so much like people
	Difference between humans and animals	Comments that highlight animality/non-humanness of animals and differences between humans and other animals.	Animals have no "feelings"
	Sympathy	Sympathy and sorrow expressed towards non-human characters	I feel bad for flower now that she is dead
	Love/like	Love and like expressed towards non-human characters	I think that I love him so much

	Hate/dislike	Hate, dislike and anger expressed towards non-human characters	I hate those Cobras!
	Species	Mentions of specific species	Meerkat, Cobra etc.
Narrative/story-line	Death	Death of non-human characters	I cant believe she died
	Birth	Birth/reproduction of non-human characters	Flower gave birth
	Romance	Romantic relationship among non-human characters	Flower and Zaphod are together forever!
	Fight	Fight/conflict among non-human characters	she evicted Tosca
	Positive moral judgement	Positive judgement towards qualities/actions of non-human characters	this brave little Meerkat who cared so much for her family.
	Negative moral judgement	Negative judgement towards qualities/actions of non-human characters	they r deathly killers
Fan community	Support	Comments which support the actions/opinions of other fans	awesome video 5 stars

	Instrumental questioning	Comments which ask questions to other fans/seeking information from other fans about fan-created contents	What program did you use?
	Socialising	Online fan socialising	Haha, thank you, Shay! <3
	Argument	Online arguments/conflicts among fans or between fans and non-fans	you haters GO FUCK YOURSELVES YOU SONS OF BITCHES!
	Information seeking	Comments which question the shows	Hey didn't flower die? how?
	Information providing	Comments which explain the shows	He prevented deaths to most of the members from tick-and-flea-borne diseases.
Media literacy	Critical	Critical analysis and evaluation of the programmes including plot lines	sure there is some tricky editing to make the story work
	Uncritical	Acceptance of face values of the programmes	it is the hard facts of life in the Kalahari and it is an amazing show.

	Nature	Opinions that nature should not be interfered with by humans	If they were to interfere, that would ruin the entire purpose of the study.
	Human intervention	Opinions that human intervention is necessary	They [researchers] should also save their lives.
	Science orientated	Opinions that the programmes are more science/education orientated	Meerkat Manor is a very educational show
	Entertainment orientated	Opinions that the programmes are more entertainment orientated	This show is like a little soap but with meerkats as the lead characters.
	Love/like programmes	Positive emotions expressed towards the programmes	I love this show!!!
	Hate/dislike programmes	Negative emotions expressed towards the programmes	ARRRGHGH!!! ! this show is so stupid I SWEAR!